

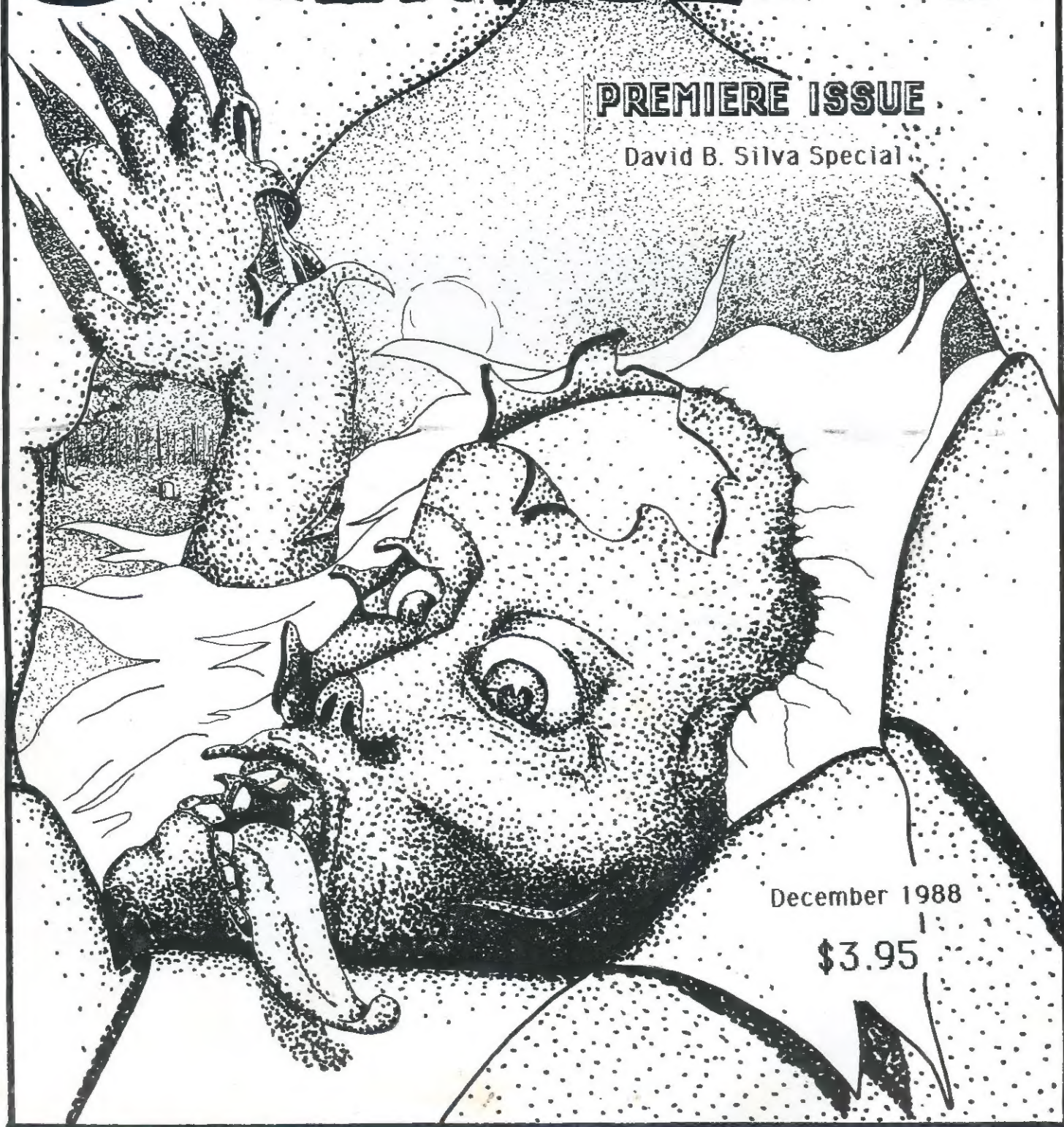
CEMETERY DANCE

PREMIERE ISSUE

David B. Silva Special

December 1988

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ART DIRECTOR: Willie Ray Caughron

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WORDS FROM THE EDITOR . . .

Welcome to the premiere issue of CEMETERY DANCE.

Please allow me to express my sincerest appreciation to the people who have made CEMETERY DANCE such an enjoyable experience.

I owe "special" thanks to several wonderful people. Deb and Bill Rasmussen (you guys are great), Melinda Jaeb (who cares about phone bills?), Janet Fox, Donald Miller, Jeannette Hopper, and many others. Your generosity has been incredible.

Bill "Cliffie" Caughron, master ninja, dart thrower, is a fantastic artist and a good friend.

David Silva, William Relling Jr. and Steve Rasnic Tem were extremely generous in lending their immense talents to an unproven magazine. Your support has been invaluable; I hope I have rewarded your trust. Also, Richard Christian Matheson has agreed to an in-depth interview for CD #3. If you haven't already, rush out and pick up a copy of Richard's short story collection SCARS. It's truly a modern classic. Richard, thanks in advance.

Next, I want to express my gratitude to Chris Lacher, editor of NEW BLOOD Magazine. Chris was a major reason why the premiere issue was completed with few difficulties. Time after time, he came to my rescue, with his words of advice. I value his opinion and judgement very much, but even more, I value his friendship.

Finally, I want to thank my family for believing in my own writing and in CEMETERY DANCE; your encouragement is much needed and appreciated. Kara, thank you for being my best friend. You are pure magic.

This premiere issue is dedicated to two very "special" people--my father and mother. Thank you for years of love and understanding--I love you both!

Keep an eye open for future CEMETERY DANCE news and updates in Janet Fox's fine publication, SCAVENGER'S NEWSLETTER. Or if you have any questions, feel free to drop me a letter at anytime. I hope you enjoy this first issue and decide to come back for more.

SCAVENGER'S NEWSLETTER 519 Ellinwood Osage City KS 66523-1329

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BODY PERFECT

William C. Rasmussen has tallied more sales in his first three years of writing than most writers can hope to in a lifetime. His 80-plus credits include NEW BLOOD, 2AM, PORTENTS, DEATHREALM, SYCOPHANT, ALPHA ADVENTURES, and many, many more. He is currently working on his first novel—a dark fantasy thriller. His wife, Debbie, is the editor of the excellent horror digest PORTENTS. Look for Bill Rasmussen's work to appear in these pages again.

Martin Murray simply had to have that poster—had to! Never before in his eighteen years had he ever laid eyes on a woman more stunningly attractive and beautiful, more . . . sensuous looking, and, yes . . . more wildly erotic and stimulating.

She had a perfect body!

And, apparently, the photographer had also agreed, for scrawled in small print in the lower left-hand corner of the poster was the title: *The Body Perfect*.

God, she was perfect, he repeated to himself, staring longingly at her smooth, golden-hued figure, her skin freshly wet from a romp in the surf, no doubt, and glistening like diamonds.

He brushed his fingertips lightly across the surface of the picture, tracing the gentle curve of her body, from her fine, honey-blond hair to her sparkling, light brown eyes; down to her flawless nose and moist, pouting lips; the long, slender neck cocked seductively to one side; her perfect breasts, the nipples hard and straining upwards against her damp swimsuit top, threatening to peek out; her flat, trim waist and narrow hips, the string tie undone on the side of the brief bikini bottom facing him, her graceful fingers toying with the loose ends, teasing him; her unbelievably long legs (emphasized all the more by the high-cut bottom), one bent slightly at the knee, toes burrowing in the sand, the opposite hip and leg thrust forward suggestively. She smiled at the camera as innocently as a little girl, but beckoned him forward provocatively with the curled and pointing fingers of her outstretched left hand.

Damn! He couldn't stand it any longer. He readjusted the front of his jeans as discreetly as possible; things were getting a bit cramped down there, he realized.

Staring a bit longer at the poster, he thought that only one thing could have made the girl more beautiful, more alluring—and that was if she had blue eyes. He had light blue eyes . . . and blond hair for that matter; and for some reason he preferred those characteristics in a woman, too. Not that he was complaining about the picture—not at all! She still was the most incredible thing he'd ever seen. But blue eyes would have made the entire package just about untouchable in the looks department. Without a doubt.

So, without further ado, he snatched up a rolled version of the same poster, trotted over to the counter and fished a wallet out of his pocket to pay for his purchase. He hurried back to his dorm room, which he shared with another student, and unfurled his dream-come-true so he could tape it on the wall.

That done, he gazed once again at the poster, for the first time noticing the knot of a dozen or more young men off in the background, practically falling in the sand in their lustful frenzy, their stunned faces drawn to the beauty in front of them like steel to a magnet. He understood their expressions completely; she was definitely a knockout. Yet, something about the scene bothered him now, something that suddenly began to prey on his mind like some little known fact or odd bit of information that refused to surface. He just couldn't quite put a finger on it . . . something about the way the young men looked at her? Or was it the way she looked at him, as if she were trying to lure him to her . . .? But that was impossible! He tore his eyes away from the poster and, with much difficulty, buried himself in one of his textbooks.

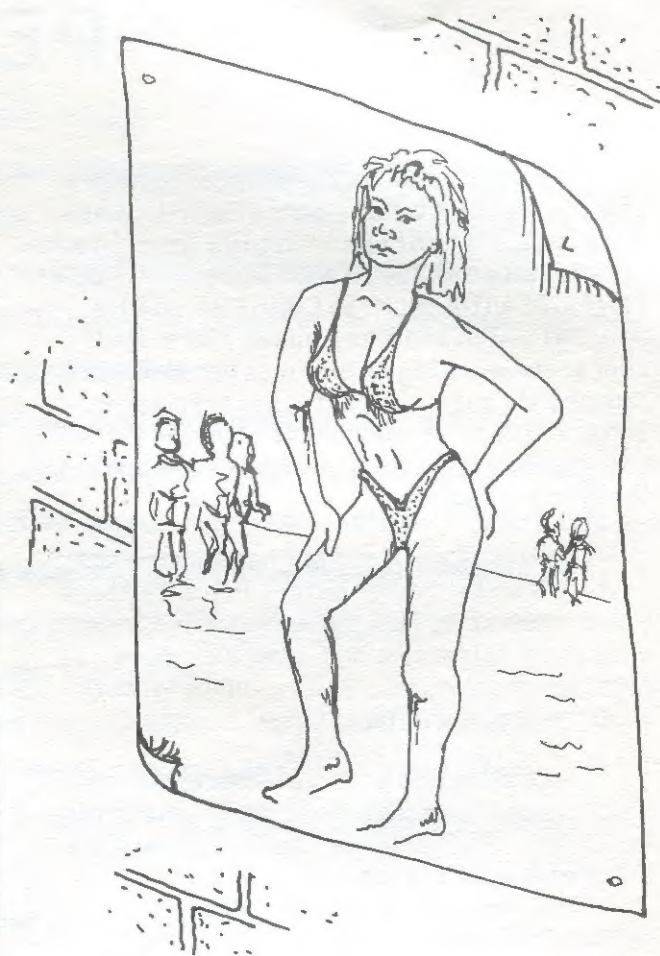
Later that evening he decided to turn in early and get some rest. The riddle of the poster still plagued him, and while his body craved another visual dose of the young woman's perfect frame, his mind balked at the thought entirely, the rational, logical half of his brain

telling him he'd think and function better on a good night's rest. He only hoped his roommate didn't wake him when he returned.

But even as his consciousness ebbed and he spiralled lazily downward into the black abyss of sleep, the newly-taped poster rustled on the wall, slowly pulling itself free of its bonds and fluttering like a moth on the nonexistent current of air in the room until finally settling like a light blanket on Martin's sleeping and unsuspecting form . . .

When Martin's roommate, Jim, returned early the next morning from an especially late date, he was very surprised to find Martin gone, his customary spot now occupied by a flashy poster of an exceptionally good looking girl. Moving nearer to the bed for a closer inspection, he couldn't help but stare at the beautiful woman, mesmerized.

He didn't notice the startled faces of the young men in the distance behind her—not stunned by her beauty but appalled at their plight; he didn't notice the bewildered grimace of his own friend and roommate in their midst—the latest addition to this otherworldly, other-dimensional paper prison; the only thing he did notice was the incredibly attractive woman with the perfect body who dominated the scene, oozing sex all the way up from her toes to her pretty, light blue eyes . . .



PANTOPHOBIA #1

TALES THAT GO BUMP IN YOUR MIND

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 t. WINTER DAMON
 JANET FOX
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art by:

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A BREATHE OF FRESH AIR

Edgar F. Tatro is a veteran high school English teacher. His mystery and horror tales, poems and literary articles can be found in TWISTED, NEW BLOOD, 2AM, PORTENTS, HARDBOILED, DARK STARR, OUROBOROS, and many other publications. He is currently working on two short story collections, one of mystery tales, one of horror tales, for Louisiana's Baker Street Publications.

Little Benji Drummond coiled up into a ball like a baby possum in hiding and screamed full tilt after the first looping right smashed into his left temple. "Sheriff, get this maniac outta here!"

Sheriff Olsen came charging through the door from his front office, unlocked the old cell and peeled Larry Crump off poor Benji's sagging back.

"Two days in the sweatbox will cure you, Larry," grunted Sheriff Olsen.

"Aw what for? He started it!" was Crump's sour defense.

"Right!" said the sheriff. "A 240 pounder smashing the pee outta Little Benji and it's Benji's fault? Hang it up, Larry."

"Yeah. Well, for the two days I've been stuck in this hole Benji's been shootin' looies all over the cell. That's gross, Sheriff. I ain't takin' that garbage."

"You won't have to where you're goin'," said the sheriff.

As the law officer dragged the hulking Larry Crump to solitary confinement, little Benji Drummond, a tad larger than a sleazy mouse with a hernia, badgered massive Larry til he was safely out of sight. "Crump the hump! Crump the hump!"

"I'll turn you into a pretzel, Benji." The door slammed shut on the echo of the threat.

Little Benji dropped the tough-guy facade and grimaced as he massaged the side of his throbbing forehead. Unexpectedly, he began to hack spasmodically and spewed a glob of black phlegm against the side cell wall.

"Sheriff! Sheriff! It's too friggin' hot in

here!"

After dealing with Larry Crump, an aging Sheriff Olsen retraced his steps through the outside door to listen wearily to little Benji's complaints.

"What is it now, Benji?" asked the sheriff who winced with puzzlement and disgust when he spied the frequent black stains of mucus on the stone walls.

"I ain't well, Sheriff. It's too damn hot in here. I'm still gettin' headaches all the time and for once Humpty Dumpty Crump is right. Look at the black yuck I'm spittin' up. How long you gonna keep me in this dump, huh?"

"Look Benji, you've got three days to go and your sentence is up. I shut down the thermostat, but it ain't working right. I know it stinks in here, but there's nothing I can do. I'm waiting for that air quality report they did a month ago, but until then, the health authorities won't do nothin'. They think you're just whining again. If you wanna fill out another health hazard complaint, I'll get you a form."

"Aw, screw that, Sheriff. I'll just wait it out. You know I can't write for shit."

Sheriff Olsen shrugged his rounded shoulders and whispered, "Sorry Benji."

"I'll make it, Sheriff. God damn bureaucrats oughtta build a new jail. We ain't animals, ya know."

"I know, Benji." Sheriff Olsen was feeling a twinge of guilt. "I'll call again about the air quality report before I head home, okay?"

"Thanks Sheriff. Crump thinks you're a maggot, but you're okay by me," and Benji began to gag again. The sheriff slipped out quickly to avoid hearing rasps within Benji's cage of fetid air.

Two days later a more cooperative Larry Crump was released from the official "sweatbox" and allowed to return to the cell once the sheriff was convinced that both he and Benji would call a truce.

"Besides," the sheriff reminded Larry, "Benji gets out tomorrow anyway."

It was Thursday evening, the sheriff's turn for night shift duty. At ten o'clock he gave his two incongruous inmates the "lights out" warning and headed up front to read the latest Edmond Perry locked-room murder mystery.

At seven minutes into the morning side of midnight Sheriff Olsen's literary reverie came to an abrupt halt. The sheriff wasn't sure what unnerved him more—the ungodly screams from the cell or the cacophony of thrashing metal. His imagination pictured Godzilla tearing the roof off an all-aluminum garage.

Even Sheriff Olsen knew this wasn't the usual fisticuffs. He prepared himself for the worst as he rushed for the cell harboring Benji the possum and Crump the hump.

Olsen flicked the light switch. His trained ears caught a strange, reverberating, but farway sound. What was it? The short squeal of accelerating Corvette wheels? The cut-off chattering of an angry Chimp? Galvanic scraping fingers on a slate blackboard? Brief, distinct, hollow, then silence . . . except for the plaintive groans coming from the cell's floor . . . Crump the hump huddled in a fetal position, his eyes and mind shutting out the world. Ironical . . . Crump playing the role of possum.

The sheriff quickly surveyed the cell before cautiously crouching to aid the obese Larry Crump, who twitched awkwardly as Olsen placed his hands delicately on the prisoner's enormous shoulders and turned him around. Larry Crump's face and chest were shredded like jello slashed with razor blades . . . like so much splattered red peanut butter dipped in wet Kleenex.

"Where's Benji? Where's Benji?" wailed Sheriff Olsen as he tried not to vomit.

Crump, beyond giving coherent responses, whispered, "red eyes in the vent," then collapsed in a comatose heap. Olsen stared uncomprehendingly at the black mouth of the ventilation shaft, its protective covering torn away like discarded cardboard packaging, ripped the way a child snatches wisps of cotton candy. Bewildered, the sheriff back-stepped to the emergency alarm system and pummelled the lever. He stood guard til help arrived to tend to poor Larry Crump's lacerations. It was likely that anything would ever heal Crump's mind.

By morning, after hours of rephrasing a dozen times the same unproductive answers, Sheriff Olsen was allowed a shower and a few moments sleep. The lone state trooper remain-

ing on the scene, Captain Louis Coyle, better known as "Granite Face," seemed more suspicious than stumped . . . nothing new for this hard-edged cop.

It was clear to Coyle that the vent was an outrageous diversion to enable Benji to escape through the cell's open door. Of course he had no logical explanation for Crump's wounds or odd remark or the damage to the vent cover, all of which somehow put Sheriff Olsen in a "mighty bad light."

The trooper had apparently forgotten that this was Benji Drummond's last night in the county jail, but the metaphorical bag over Captain Coyle's head was quite large. He had also failed to consider how or why Benji would concoct such an elaborate scheme to leave a few hours sooner and why Sheriff Olsen would jeopardize his exemplary career for a loser like Benji Drummond. Uncle Sam delivered the solution just before noon.

The local mailman, Clarence Fullmer, dropped the big yellow envelope with a thump on Sheriff Olsen's desk. Olsen groggily discovered inside the jail's indoor air quality report conducted by Henry Gordon Associates of Newton Lower Falls.

The sheriff plunked himself down and managed an ironic smile. For six weeks or so Benji had bitched and moaned about the insufferable heat and stagnant air, which he claimed was the cause of his headaches and black saliva. Finally the report showed up which might force the bigwigs uptown to make some changes and now Benji wouldn't be around to benefit or brag that he had forced the issue.

"What's that?" asked Captain Coyle, who was sucking down his fifteenth cup of coffee to stay awake.

"Oh, just a report on the air quality of the jail we had done a month ago. Benji kept nagging me to have it done . . . now he's gone." The sheriff's voice trailed off.

"Well," said Captain Coyle as he sighed a deep breath, "read it through. Maybe it'll help us . . . er you, to come up with an explanation." The innuendo was far from subtle. The Captain continued, "If you didn't let him slip by you, the only other way out is that vent which ain't more than sixteen inches wide."

"I told you a million times he didn't go out that door! He was already gone before I unlocked it." The sheriff stood his ground.

"Yeah, yeah, I know the story," said

Granite Face. "Look I'm going back to the cell again for another once-over just on the chance we missed something. Benji was right about one thing . . . it's hard to breathe back there. Maybe you guys imagined the whole thing from lack of oxygen."

"Crump's wounds aren't hallucinations," said the sheriff. The captain grunted as he headed out back.

The insinuations suggesting that Olsen was either a daffy incompetent or a motiveless conspirator ticked off the sheriff to no end. He began reading the report as an excuse to ignore the pompous state trooper who wore blinders more efficiently than any mounted patrolman's filly. Enough said.

To his surprise Sheriff Olsen found the evaluation quite revealing. It didn't take him long to deduce the cause of Benji's headaches, lethargy and itching eyes. The report cited an unhealthy level of carbon dioxide and poor air circulation as key culprits. Return vents to bring in additional outside air were recommended.

Meanwhile, Captain Coyle had also discovered something unique on the twisted metal once recognizable as the grating for the lone cell vent. There were metal striations resembling slashes as if sliced by a can opener, metal on metal, or by a sharp garden rake drawn across a large sheet of soft butter. Coyle squinted in submission. He sensed an evil beyond his comprehension. Swallowing some self-pride, he silently began to apologize deep inside to Sheriff Olsen.

"Sweet Jesus of Nazareth! Coyle, get out here!" shouted a stunned Sheriff Olsen.

The doorknob whacked against the back office wall denting the plaster. "What the hell happened now?" yelled Granite Face.

"You ain't gonna believe this, but Benji went out that vent."

"Bullshit!" scoffed Coyle.

"No," said the sheriff, "but you're close."

"What the hell are you talkin' about, Olsen?"

"Listen to me; this report explains it," countered Sheriff Olsen.

"Explains what? His headaches?"

"No . . . well yes, that too, but those were caused by too much heat and carbon dioxide. That's not the point."

"The point is on your head," snapped Coyle.

"Are you going to listen to me or what? These air quality inspectors found feces in that vent . . . and Benji was breathing it!"

"Feces? What's feces?"

"You're a captain, huh? Feces is crap, excrement, number two! Where the Christ are you from, Coyle, the Ozarks?"

"Crap? How could somebody crap in a vent?"

"That's it!" beamed the sheriff. "It wasn't a who . . . it was an it."

"An it? What's an it?"

"An animal," answered Sheriff Olsen.

"You're fried, Olsen. That outside chute is nine feet up the outside wall. No animal could reach that."

"A flying one could," said the sheriff.

"A flying one? What flying one?" screamed Coyle whose gauge for tolerance was reading "empty" now.

"A Desmodus Rufus."

"A desmo what?"

"Captain, the feces that Benji breathed for six weeks back there came from a Desmodus Rufus . . . It's a bat, Captain, a bat!"

"So? What's so special about that?" asked Coyle.

"See for yourself." The sheriff pointed to the report. "Captain, it's a vampire bat!"

Captain Coyle's granite face and frame stiffened as if struck by a sledge hammer. "You don't think . . ."

"Benji isn't Benji anymore," completed Sheriff Olsen.

"It can't be."

"Got any better ideas, besides blaming me?" offered the sheriff.

Captain Coyle, looking human for the first time in a long time, paused a moment and surrendered to a concept alien to his whole existence. As a sign of acceptance, he humbly whispered, "Well thank God, he's gone."

The sheriff eyed his superior and asked soberly, "Yeah, but where?"

Off in the darkness the former Benji Drummond had gently settled down, upside down that is, suspended by his newly formed talons from a tiny plumbing fixture inside the ventilation shaft of the Broad Meadows Day Care Nursery . . . and below him lay a pile of fresh droppings.



THE DOUBLE

If you are reading this magazine, then Steve Rasnic Tem needs no introduction. His chilling tales have appeared in many professional anthologies—THE CUTTING EDGE, SHADOWS, NIGHT VISIONS, BEST OF MASQUES, HALLOWEEN HORRORS—and have earned him raves as one of horror's top short fiction writers. His novel, EXCAVATION, was published earlier this year. Steve described "The Double" as a "quasi-surreal short-short." I can describe it in two words that appear often in my CEMETERY DANCE guidelines: chilling and disturbing.

A mother and a father bend over their small son, poking him with fingers, tickling him, slapping him quickly and hard, both laughing merrily all the while.

Our son, our only son, they chorus.

The son watches their gay faces in amazement. All this has happened before, many times, a long time ago. He is sure of it.

Our son, our only son, a mother and a father chortle as they pick him up out of his small chair, tickle him, then drop him on his head.

And the son is sure this has all happened before, many times before.

A mother and a father leave the room, leave the son to himself as they go about their dinner, parties, the evening news, and copulation.

The son attends to his own chores: he makes a small body out of a baby blanket stuffed with striped socks, a head from a red rubber ball, and toes, fingers, and penis from the peanuts his parents left behind in a large bowl. He carefully draws his own face onto the ball/head with a stub of black crayon.

He notes with disinterest the lack of a nose on his new doll.

He chews off a fingernail and secretes it within the doll's clothing. He spits into his palm and rubs it into the doll's belly.

A mother and a father return to find the doll in their son's chair. They kiss it and tickle it, fondle it and caress it, throw it to the floor and do a merry dance over the pieces of the body, singing Our son, our only son . . .

The son watches from behind his bed, feeling shadowy impressions of feet fluttering over his body, kicks and smashes which no longer hurt.



FOREVER ANGELS



Ronald Kelly's tales of Southern horror have flooded the small-press scene over the last year. His work has appeared in *NEW BLOOD*, *NOCTULPA*, *DEATHREALM*, *THIN ICE*, *FRIGHT DEPOT*, *TERROR TIME AGAIN*, and others. His novel, *THE TOBACCO BARN*—a tale of rural horror set in the Great Depression—is making the rounds with the New York publishers. Ronald writes of himself: "I have aspirations of becoming a full-time writer of the macabre someday."

Deanna Hudson didn't believe her second-grade classmates at first. Not until they actually took her there and showed her that it was true.

The Glover County schoolbus let them out at the corner of Flanders Drive and Peartree Road at a quarter after three and they walked the two blocks to the Milburne Baptist Church. The building had stood there for a century, always virgin white and immaculate, the lofty steeple rising in a pinnacle that could be seen throughout the entire township. Milburne, Tennessee was located on the very buckle of the Southern bible-belt and the little church was a picturesque example of how very prominent religion was in that region of the century.

There were five in the youthful procession that walked quietly down the sidewalk, then crossed the well-mown lawn that separated the church property from the adjoining graveyard. There was Deanna, Jimmy Thompson, Butch Spence, and the Waller twins, Vickie and Veronica. They made their way through the cramped cemetery, past marble headstones and a scattering of lonely trees, their schoolbooks tucked beneath their arms. Thunder rumbled overhead. The day had begun cheerful enough, but by afternoon dark storm clouds had rolled in from the west, threatening spring showers and perhaps a thunderstorm before the night ended.

"Well, there it is . . . just like I told

you," grinned Butch with a sneer of triumph. "Can't call me a fibber now, can you, you danged sissy?"

Deanna said nothing. With the others, she slowly approached the little half-acre lot fenced in ornate wrought iron. An unlocked gate sported a couple of trumpet-playing angels overhead and a poetic inscription: Those who are called to the Lord in innocence shall be, forever, angels.

"Come on," urged Jimmy, pushing the iron gate open with a rusty squeal. Deanna followed the others inside, trying hard to suppress a shiver of cold uneasiness. Yes, it was exactly what it appeared to be, exactly what Butch and Jimmy had described so masterfully on the elementary school playground. It was a miniature graveyard . . . a cemetery for dead children.

They began to walk among the rows of tiny tombstones, each a quarter of the size of their adult counterparts in the next lot over. "Don't be such a scaredy-cat!" Butch shot back in disgust when the fair-haired girl hesitated near the gateway. Finally, she drew up her courage and followed her schoolmates onto the gently sloping hill of the small graveyard.

At first the stones seemed fairly new, chiseled from pastel granite of pink and blue, bearing cryptic names like "Little Tommy" or "Baby Linda." Unlike the headstones out in the big graveyard, these seemed devoid of flower arrangements. Instead, long forgotten toys were scattered upon the short mounds; rubber balls, pacifiers, and rattles, their colors bleached by sun and rain, the plastic cracked and broken. A teddy bear laid on its side before the grave of "Sweet Andy Wilson," its eyes blank and unseeing. The stuffing had been burrowed from the fir of its matted tummy, strown across the grass by some wild animal that had come foraging for food with no luck.

Further into the cemetery, as the little hill reached its peak and began to descend to the

edge of a thick forest, the headstones grew older, the rows choked with weeds. The inscriptions were more difficult to read, the names sanded clear down to the bare stone by decades of wind and harsh weather. "My dad says these have been here since the 1900's," said Butch. "Said there was a big diphtheria epidemic back then that killed half the babies in Glover County. Most of them are buried right here . . . beneath our feet."

They stood there in reverent silence for a moment. The gentle breeze had grown blustery, whipping the leathery leaves of the cemetery's only tree, a huge blossoming magnolia at the very heart of the grassy knoll. Deanna began to back away, a creepy feeling threatening to overcome her. "I've got to get home," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

"Go on home, if you want," shrugged Butch. "But you ain't gonna be able to escape them, you know. Not as close as you live to this place." They all looked off into the three acre woods that separated the churchyard from the new subdivision that had been built to either side of Peartree Road. Through a gap in the pine grove, Deanna could see her parent's split-level house, the one they had moved into only two months before.

"What do you mean?" asked the girl, clutching her books tighter. "Who are you talking about?"

A devilish grin crossed Butch Spence's freckled face. "The babies, that's who," he said. "They crawl up from their graves at night, you know. Old Man Caruthers, the church caretaker, he's heard them out here before; giggling and crying, crawling among the tombstones, trying to find their mothers. And on dark, stormy nights they hop the fence over yonder and crawl through the woods . . . to your house!"

It began to rain. "Stop it!" yelled Deanna, her fear pushing her near tears. "You're scaring me!"

"Listen!" piped Jimmy Thompson. "Did you hear that?"

The sound of something stirring in the high weeds on the far side of the fence reached their ears. "It's them!" yelled Butch in bogus panic. "It's the dead babies! They're in the woods already, Deanna, and they're heading straight for your house!"

"Stop it!" sobbed the girl. "Do you hear

me? Just stop it!"

The Waller twins squealed and giggled in a mixture of fear and delight. The sounds in the woods grew louder. It sounded as though something was in the thicket, crawling on hands and knees.

"Mama!" wailed an infantile voice from out of the high weeds. "Dadda!"

"Gaah, gaah! Goo, goo!" cooed another from the same vicinity beyond the bordering fence.

"Run, Deanna, run!" called Butch, stifling the laughter that would come later when the grand deception was over and done with. Then his buddies, Hank and Jason, who had beat them there on their bikes by five minutes, would come out of the woods and they would all enjoy a big bellylaugh at the new girl's expense.

And the seven-year-old girl did run; through the open gate, across the cluttered graveyard, and past the old church to Peartree Road. By the time she reached home, the heavens had opened and delivered a drenching down-pour. She met her mother at the doorstep, soaked to the skin and crying, the laughter of her playmates lingering cruelly in her ears.

She had seen one once before . . . a dead baby.

That disturbing experience had taken place at the funeral of Grandpa Hudson a couple of years ago. Deanna had gone to the bathroom and, upon returning, lost her way among the many mourning rooms, the places where the deceased was displayed before the casket was moved to the chapel for the final services. She had entered an empty room very similar to the one her grandfather was in and, at first, she had the sinking feeling that her family had up and left her. Then she saw the difference in the flower arrangements and in the coffin that sat upon the shrouded pedestal at the head of the room.

The casket was very small, not over two feet in length. And it was the prettiest shade of baby blue that Deanna had ever seen. Although she was frightened, her curiosity was much stronger at the moment and she climbed upon one of the folding metal chairs to get a better look. She nearly lost her footing and fell off when she saw what laid in the open box. It was a baby boy, about the same age that her little brother Timothy was now. It was dressed in a blue jumper, its head covered by a knitted cap

of the same pastel hue. Tiny hands clutched a blue rattle in the shape of a sad-eyed puppy dog. It was the round, little face that scared Deanna the most, a face devoid of color, despite a touch of undertaker's rouge at each chubby cheek. A face that was coldly deceptive in its peaceful slumber, an endless sleep that would never be disturbed by a middle-of-the-night hunger for warm milk or the discomfort of a wet diaper.

As Deanna climbed off the chair and started for the door, she had heard (orthought she had heard) the dry sound of the plastic rattle echo from the casket behind her.

She thought of that as she laid in her bed that spring night and listened to the storm's fury rage outside her bedroom window. She drifted into fitful sleep, then awoke to a violent clap of thunder and a flash of lightning that illuminated her entire room, if only for a second. She clutched her Raggedy Ann, cowering beneath her bedsheets at the awful thrashing of wind and rain. She tried to fall back to sleep several times, but her thoughts were too full of Butch Spence's nasty prank and the baby blue casket at the Milburne funeral parlor. Then, when the disturbing images finally did begin to fade, something else sent her into a fit of near panic. It was a small sound, a sound nearly swallowed by the bass roar and the cymbal crash of the thunderstorm in progress.

It was the sound of a baby crying. Outside. In the woods.

Deanna pulled the covers up over her head and tried to wait it out, but that dreaded creature curiosity once again prodded her. Go take a look out the window, it told her. You'll never know what it was until you do. Maybe it was just a lost kitten or the howling of the wind. Despite her better judgement, she climbed out of bed and did exactly what that little voice told her to. She padded in barefeet across her toy-cluttered room to the big window and peeped through the lacy curtains her mother had sewn on her Singer. And she saw exactly what she was afraid she would see . . . but, no, it was much worse than that.

At first there was only darkness beyond the rain-speckled panes of her bedroom window. Then a bright flash of lightning erupted, dousing the wooded thicket at the side of the house with pale illumination. There in the weeds down below, things moved. At first she couldn't quite make out what they were. Then a double dose of electrical brilliance brought the

startling tableau to light and she clutched at the curtains in horror. Small, hairless heads bobbed through the tall grass and honeysuckle like dolphins cresting the waves of a stormy sea. The pale, hairless heads of a dozen lifeless babies.

She began to scream shrilly and then the bedroom light was on and her mother was there to comfort her. Through her tearful hysteria, she tried to explain the awful spectacle she had witnessed. Her father, his hair tousled and his eyes myopic with sleep, peered through the darkness at the yard below. "There's nothing down there, sweetheart," he said, kissing her forehead before creeping back to bed. "Nothing at all."

Her mother tucked her back into bed, wiping her tears away with Kleenex. "You just had a nightmare, honey. A bad dream," Mom said. "Now you just relax and this time you'll have a nice one." The girl followed her mother's advice and, before long, was fast asleep.

She was awakened a few hours later, again by a baby's cry, but this time it was only her brother in the nursery, wailing for his three o'clock feeding.

In some Southern communities, Memorial Day is also known as "graveyard day." That had always been the case in Milburne. It was a day of remembrance, a day reserved for respect of the dearly departed; the recently deceased, as well as those long since past. At the Baptist church it began as a day of work and ended as a day of fellowship. The men would mow the grass and trim around graves with weed-eaters. The women would tackle the stones, scrubbing away grime and bird droppings with Ajax and Brillo pads. The children also contributed in their own special way. Armed with baskets of plastic flowers, they removed the old arrangements and replaced them with the new. On the graves of veterans, they placed tiny American flags.

After the congregation had finished sprucing up the cemetery for that year, they would spread blankets and patchwork quilts upon the short-cropped grass and sit down to eat dinner on the ground. The Hudson family found a spot near the wrought iron gate of the children's cemetery and, despite Deanna's protests, they laid out their picnic lunch. After the minister's prayer, they began to enjoy a meal of fried chicken, potato salad, and cold iced tea.

It was during the churchyard meal that the town handyman, Old Redhawk, parked his rickety pickup truck in the parking lot and staggered up to where the rural congregation sat eating. Redhawk was a full-blooded Cherokee, once a proud member of a local tribe that had once made Glover County its home. But he had fallen on hard times and turned to drink. When he wasn't cleaning out someone's gutters or roofing someone's house, he could be found down at Boone Hollow Tavern, indulging in his favorite pastime. From the looks of him that May afternoon, it appeared that he had downed a few shots of sour mash whiskey before arriving to speak his mind.

Deanna sat between her parents, gently holding little Timothy's tiny hand, as the old indian ranted and raved about things long past. She couldn't understand a lot of what he seemed to be so indignant about, something concerning the desecration of sacred land and indian burial mounds. Soon, Sheriff Harding and his deputy arrived and tried to talk Old Redhawk into leaving peacefully. The drunken man took a wild swing at the constable, and suddenly, they had him face down on the ground, not more than six feet from where the Hudson family sat.

The seven-year-old watched, appalled, as they handcuffed the old indian and pulled him roughly to his feet. For a second, the indian's eyes met Deanna's. Those bloodshot eyes seemed to hold a message just for her, a dark warning. Better watch where you sit around her, little girl, they seemed to tell her. There are things buried beneath you that you could never hope to imagine. Arrowheads and pottery and the dusty bones of many a brave warrior. And, on top of that, despite the protests of the tribe, others were buried. Innocent children whose foolish parents entered them in sacred ground. There are nights at certain times of the year when the magic of the Great Elders raise those tiny bodies from their earthen slumber and return them to the world of the living. Never mind what that comforting inscription atop the cemetery gate might promise; whatever crawls this hallowed earth in the dead of night . . . it is far from being angels!

"Come on, you crazy old coot!" growled the sheriff as he herded Old Redhawk off to the patrol car. "Let's see if a week or two in the county jail will teach you to leave decent folks alone."

Mom handed Deanna a chicken leg. "Just

try to forget him, dear," she said, stroking her long blonde hair. "People do and say crazy things when they're all liquored up like that."

The girl absently took the drumstick, her eyes glued on the tiny stones that jutted along the hillside (or was it burial mound?) on the other side of the fence.

That night, Deanna had the most frightening nightmare of her young life. She dreamt that she stood alone in the half-acre cemetery in the dead of night. A full moon was out, highlighting the tiny stones, making them look like bleached teeth sprouting from earthen gums. She stood atop the small hill beneath the thick foliage of the magnolia tree, barefooted, her pink nightgown fluttering in a chill nocturnal breeze. She watched as the iron gate opened and a tall figure stepped within. It was Old Redhawk, but not the same drunken old man that she had seen earlier that day. He was now a proud Cherokee chief with feathered headdress and streaks of warpaint smeared across his ancient face and arms. Behind him filed a silent gathering of braves and squaws. Old Redhawk halted before the first row of tombstones and began to chant, lifting his hands skyward. The clouds boiled like the depths of a dark cauldron, lightning jabbing downward, gaunt fingers of blue fire upon the horizon.

Before she could flee through the backwoods to her house, the ground beneath began to buckle and heave. Clods of grass erupted, yielding a harvest of pale fleshed heads. Soon, they had clawed the smothering confinement of dank earth away and they were there before her, some toddling off balance, others crawling on all fours. The maddening crackle of old rattles and squeaky toys pressed against the girl's ears. Her screams drew their attention and, with an infantile mewing, they started up the hill toward her. The only source of escape was the tree. Limb by limb, she ascended the magnolia, glimpsing the pale little forms between the clusters of thick leaves. When she finally reached the top, she thought herself safe. But she was not. Hearing a faint stirring in the foliage above her, she looked up . . . and saw . . . her baby brother, Timothy . . . his chubby face deathly ashen . . . his Winnie the Pooh pajamas soiled and dank with fresh earth . . . and, as he reached out for her, she recoiled from his cold, little hands . . . and fell.

Deanna awoke, drenched in sweat, her

mouth cotton dry. Trembling, she turned on the hall light and crept downstairs to the kitchen sink for a drink of water. She was filling a glass under the tap, when she heard a noise on the other side of the back door. It was a dry sound, the sound of tiny beads clattering within a plastic shell, a sound much like dry bones rattling within a casket. Small bones in a small casket.

Don't look outside, she told herself. Just go back upstairs and crawl into bed and forget all about it! But that annoying little voice, Miss Curiosity, whispered urgently in her mind's ear. It could just be an old newspaper blown against the screen door, maybe a long-geared jackrabbit scratching against the concrete steps, wanting a carrot from the fridge. She walked slowly to the door, unlocked it and slid back the chain. For a second, she merely stood there. Remember what you saw the last time you looked, she told herself. But she opened the door anyway.

Nothing was there on the backdoor stoop. No crumbled newspaper. No bunny rabbit. Nothing but . . . a single pink bootie lying in the center of the newly cast concrete. Cautiously, she picked up the knitted article of baby footwear and examined it. It was old, very old, its cotton threads rotten and reeking of soil, like the peat moss daddy spread around the shrubs last Saturday. And there was something else . . . something alive. She tossed the bootie away with a cry of disgust. There had been squirmy white things crawling from between the interlacing fingers . . . maggots.

Then, as she was about to step back inside, she heard the faint rustling of the high weeds at the far end of the house. It was pitch dark that night; no moon at all. She strained her eyes until she actually began to see them. Tiny, pale splotches against the deep shadows of the pine forest. Not emerging from the thicket, but retreating.

"Deanna," someone whispered behind her.

She nearly screamed, but recognized her mother's voice before she could. She ran to her, quivering in the warm comfort of her arms, smelling the light perfume that lingered in her mother's hair. "What's the matter, darling?" Mom asked, bewildered. "Were you sleepwalking again?" Deanna said nothing; just continued to cling with all her might.

She had come down to fix Timothy's three o'clock bottle. When the milk had been warmed

and tested on the inside of Mom's forearm, the two mounted the steps to the upstairs hallway. The nursery was strangely quiet as they stepped inside. Mom felt along the wall for the light switch. "Surely he didn't fall back to sleep," she told her daughter. "He was screaming like a little banshee only a few minutes ago."

A click and the light came on, flooding the room with brilliance. Lacy blue curtains, dancing clowns painted upon the walls, and in the crib, beneath a dangling mobile of Sesame Street characters, laid . . .

Mom screamed.

The baby bottle slipped from her hand and rolled along the hardwood floor.

Deanna could only stand there and stare . . . and think about the magnolia tree.

The Milburne pediatrician said it was something called "crib death." Deanna didn't know exactly what that was; only that it happened every now and then in Glover County. Her baby brother's passing had been disturbing for the girl, as had his funeral, baby blue casket and all. But the most devastating thing was the place they had buried him. Deanna had screamed and cried when she found out, but the grownups ignored her and buried Timothy there anyway. On the half-acre hill of stones . . . beneath that blossoming magnolia tree.

After that, Deanna Hudson found it hard to sleep at night. Her parents worried that the strain of her brother's death caused the bouts of insomnia. But it was not . . . it was something much more sinister.

What drove the comfort of slumber from young Deanna's mind were the nightly visits. Visits by a single tiny shadow outside her bedroom window and the low cooing sounds that drifted from beneath the sash. She would lay with her back to the window, her thin body shivering and her eyes screwed tightly shut, until the first rays of dawn chased that awful presence from her midst. For she knew that if she listened to her little voice and turned to look, she would see his pale and bloodless face pressed against the panes, see those dark liquid eyes, glazed and unseeing, burning in at her with some strange light, some unholy motivation torn between the restlessness of the living and the moldering of the dead.

And, the following morning, there would be another toy missing from the cool sheets of Timothy's abandoned crib.

LEG MAN



Chris B. Lacher is the editor of the popular horror magazine, *NEW BLOOD*. His graphic fiction has appeared in numerous horror publications such as *ELDRITCH TALES*, *NIGHTMARES* and *NIGHT SLIVERS*. He writes a regular column for *NIGHTMARES* and has tales accepted for Graham Masterson's anthology, *SCARECARE* and the new pro magazine, *GOREZONE*. Look for Chris' interview with William Relling Jr. in *CEMETERY DANCE #2*.

Slash exited the club through the stage door and stepped into the alley. He slumped against the bricks, sighing deeply, and lit a cigarette. The cement was wet from the rain and he could see the neon from the Strip gyrating at the end of the alley.

A soft, gonging thump sounded from behind the dumpster across from him. There was about four feet of darkness between the dumpster and the brick wall. Just about anything—or anyone—could have been back there, so Slash flicked his cigarette away and turned to go back into the club. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a girl's arm poking out of the darkness.

The gonging thump sounded again when she hit her elbow on the dumpster. She cursed. Slash came off the steps and walked across the alley.

She was struggling with her jacket. She shrugged it onto her shoulders and pulled her hair out from underneath the collar. Shirtless, her breasts glowed like pale quarter-moons behind the dark halves of the jacket. "It's hot in there," she explained. She blinked, as if sizing him up, then smiled. "You can really play. I've watched you."

"I can do a lotta things," Slash said. She wasn't a regular, but he had seen her in the crowd the last couple of nights. She must've watched him come out here a few times, too. He didn't know why, but she seemed different from the rest of the sleazes that approached him, even though she looked and acted the same.

"Show me." She pulled the jacket halves

from her breasts, stepped up to him, and kissed his lips. Her tongue tasted slightly of ammonia.

They ended up on the wet concrete, Slash with his back against the bricks and she kneeling in his lap and holding his head between her breasts. They were big but lumpy, somehow, the skin smooth but hard, like some kind of shell. If he'd thought about it, he would've realized that something was wrong, but his dick was less sensible. Instead, he pushed the jacket off her shoulders—he'd never seen such pale skin—and bit her nipples. A thin rectangle of light seeped from behind the door across the alley, but otherwise the alley was dark. Slash sucked at her nipples with all his might, but they remained depressed. They were pale as her skin, and tasted faintly of ammonia. Finally, they began to stiffen.

Then they seized his tongue and were inside his mouth, slashing gums and teeth like a frenzied piranha . . .

Izzy poked his head around the door a few seconds later. He saw Slash on his hands and knees by the dumpster. It looked like he was searching for a lost contact lens.

"It's been rainin, man. What the fuck'aya doin?" Izzy laughed, walking toward Slash, hands buried deep in the pockets of his leather jacket.

Still on his hands and knees, Slash looked up.

Izzy shrieked and bolted backwards. He lost his feet and went down hard on the concrete steps before the door. Hands trembling, legs as weak and rubbery as a fawn's, he scrambled to get back inside the club, to get away from the nightmare on its knees before him.

A wide strip of glossy blood drenched Slash's chin and shirt front. The back part of his tongue was dangling out of his mouth, useless and shredded. With slick fingers, he scooped up the larger remnants of his mouth from the puddle below him, then turned toward Izzy and sat down heavily on his rear. He tried

to piece the puzzle back together again before he bled to death.

In the dream, Izzy was walking in a park when he stopped to shoo some crows away from a pile of bread crumbs. He bent to his knees and scooped up some of the crumbs, but then something started to fall out of his mouth onto the grass, and suddenly his fingers were bloody and sticky and somebody was shooing him out of the way and grabbing at the crumbs, only there were no more crumbs in the sticky grass, now, just bits of flesh and pointy teeth, and suddenly Slash nudged him over, grinning that bloody smile . . .

He bolted upright on the mattress, head near the window, flashing lights from the Strip setting his face aglow. His heart fired like an automatic weapon.

I'm gettin' sicka this fuckin' shit, he thought, as he collapsed onto his back. He had to sleep staring at the ceiling because the mattress smelled so bad of dampness and age; he had to live in this stink-hole with everybody else and play every fuckin' club they could just to survive. Fuckin' ridiculous. It was hard enough when Slash was alive, but now it seemed pointless. Izzy couldn't remember a day when they hadn't played at least two shows, couldn't remember a day when he didn't have the guitar in his hands, hoping and believing that sooner or later something would break. But now he just didn't give a shit. Nothing felt right. He couldn't play worth shit, couldn't fuckin' sleep because of the dreams, and he couldn't stop thinking of that song, You're fuckin' crazy, uh huh, yeah, You're fuckin' crazy . . . He was starting to wonder if maybe he was crazy.

Somebody had told the cops that they saw some broad coming out of the alley just before they heard Izzy's screams. Someone had also told them—one of the coroner's guys, or somebody—that it looked like some type of high-powered drill was used on Slash's mouth. Pieces of his face were everywhere behind the dumpster; someone had found a bloody gold filling . . .

It had to've been somebody from the club, somebody Slash had seen a few times before. They'd been playing there pretty regularly. Even Izzy recognized a few of the faces—girls, mostly—as regulars. But shit, what kinda nutcase hung around so they could get you alone and turn a drill on you?

He had to stop thinking about it, though, or he'd never touch a woman again.

He heard a siren. As he listened to it approach, then fade, he realized he was holding his breath. He released it.

The dreams were the worst, though. But at least this one didn't have the girl-thing in it. Lately, the dreams consisted of his approaching a kneeling Slash. The locations were always different—sometimes they were in the alley, a wave of blood breaking from the Strip, while other times they were in the apartment; once they were even in a church—but wherever they were, Slash was always kneeling next to something behind which someone could hide. Izzy knew someone was waiting to jump out of him, but he walked up to Slash anyway. Sometimes Slash grabbed him and tried to kiss him with his half-tongue, sometimes the girl-thing seized his ankle. But she wasn't in his dream tonight, so maybe he was getting over it.

What was she? In the dream, Izzy knew she wasn't human, and he wasn't so sure the thing walking around outside his dreams was, either. He knew it sounded lame, but she couldn't have done those things to Slash unless she had a mortar drill. Those who thought they saw her didn't mention anything about a drill, and nothing was found in the alley, which was too thin to accomodate a car. And he didn't care how fucked up Slash might've been, he wouldn't go near some psycho-broad with a drill.

And Izzy kept having these weird dizzy spells, flashbacks almost, in which he saw chopped images of Slash kissing the girl as she bit off chunks of his lips.

The front door blew open, crashed against the wall. Izzy jumped, but then he heard Axl and some girl laughing.

Izzy turned his back to them and lay still. The mattress smelled, but maybe they wouldn't bother him if he feigned sleep. He heard them move into the kitchen and turn on the light. Now he heard two female voices. Great.

Something made a depression in his mattress.

"Izzy, you awake?" Axl whispered.

"No." Izzy didn't whisper.

"C'mon, man. These chicks really wanna get fucked. Have some fun with me, Iz."

"April's in the next room, asshole."

Axl sighed. "Exactly my point."

Izzy felt Axl rise and heard him make his way back to the kitchen. In a few minutes, they

had moved to Axl's mattress, unzipping zippers, removing clothing, kissing loudly. It got worse as they continued. Izzy sighed, then got a hard-on. Finally, it was quiet and he could feel himself drifting. Just as he was about to fall asleep, one of the female voices whispered, "Night, Izzy."

A chill clawed him. They didn't know his name. He held his breath again, listening, but all was silent. He prayed he had imagined hearing that.

Later, he awoke and heard chewing sounds. Then he heard Axl moan. Relieved, he tried to fall back asleep . . .

Some time after that, in his dreams, he heard the chewing sounds again. But he didn't hear anything from Axl . . .

When he awoke again, he heard hungry lapping sounds. But he thought he was dreaming . . .

Bones snapped, balloons of blood splattered on the cement. Then she tried to get up . . .

Realization came slowly. His mind, bodiless yet alert, slowly moved toward a stairway. Gaining speed now, gaining momentum. Moving up the stairs quickly. Into a shadowy hallway. Speeding past closed doors. Mind-energy heaving them open, banging them into walls. Speeding like a bullet, now. Force building, building, awaiting contact. The last door crashed open. Mind and body met in an eruption of shrieks and howls.

Naked, Izzy stood in front of her. She was kneeling. He held her head between his hands in a vise-grip as she sucked on him. He looked down. Her mouth was empty. She laughed, said something unintelligible.

He was moving himself in and out of her breast. Instead of nipples, thin brown lips circled his penis.

He shoved her backwards and the force sent her reeling. His back smashed into the window. Blood ran over his buttocks, down his legs. He heard the larger panes of glass shatter

in the street below.

Inspired, he lunged forward, seized her hair and yanked her toward the window. She got a claw-hand around his ear, but then he heaved her through the window and she fell.

She landed on her side. Bones snapped, balloons of blood splattered on the cement. Then she tried to get up . . .

He didn't know where the idea came from, but he blessed the source and prayed for success. Heart firing, he hobbled into the kitchen—he was beginning to feel an escalating siren of pain where the glass cut his back—shoved the stoppers into the drains in the sink, and turned the taps to full. He grabbed one of his small Fender amps—compact but powerful—out of the corner and lugged it over to the outlet under the phone. He limped back to his mattress, pulled on his jeans, found Axl's biker boots and shoved his feet inside. He dared a quick glance at Axl's mattress. Naked, Axl lay atop it on his belly, a shiny dark pool coagulating on his back; the other girl was gone. Izzy quickly looked away. He looked out the window on his way back to the kitchen. The street below was empty. He grabbed his guitar, plugged it into the amp, and turned the volume to zero.

She opened the door just after he turned off the faucets.

Izzy stood in the corner of the kitchen, trembling, holding the guitar like a baseball bat.

She closed the door silently behind her and limped forward. She wore Axl's bloody clothes, so it was difficult to tell how badly she was hurt.

Izzy's sphincter muscle contracted in fear. She'd killed him and put on his bloody clothes. But she was barefoot, so maybe it would work.

She stopped less than six inches from the kitchen floor. Izzy panted fearfully and raised the guitar higher.

"Oh, Izzy," she purred, somehow managing to sound inviting, even though her mouth and borrowed clothes were stained with Axl's blood. The neon from the boulevard shined brightly through the window, tinting her pale skin a luminescent green; she glowed like the heads and hands of those old monster model kits. "Blood tastes good, Izzy. Try some, try these," she purred again, voice as smooth as velvet. She pulled the shirt tatters away from her chest. Her nipples were not nipple any longer, but it was too dark for Izzy to see exactly what

they had become.

"N—" Izzy had to swallow around the fear-knot in his throat before continuing. "Not much of a tit man," he mumbled. She smiled again and stepped forward into the kitchen. She looked down at the water that had overflowed from the sink, and that was when Izzy charged. He stabbed the guitar into her chest—even with the volume down, it twanged crazily—so she had to clutch the neck top push it away. When she touched the strings, she literally began to glow. The circuits strained as she absorbed all the power. Her body suddenly went rigid, then spasmed, and her hair started to frizz and rise. Smoke drifted out of her pores. Izzy gagged on the smell. She was still clutching the guitar, bubbling flesh melting the neck like acid, when she fell onto the wet floor.

She fried like an egg in grease, feet splashing water, body dancing. Izzy let her cook until he could stand the smell no longer. Then he moved to unplug the guitar.

When he was sure she was dead, he waded through the puddle and nudged her with the toe of the boot. He stomped on her sternum until it was nothing but a smoking, chalky pulp; just for good measure.

He hobbled back over to Axl to see if maybe he was still alive, but as Izzy bent to his knees, he spotted offal inside the bloody hole in Axl's back. He stumbled away, gagging. The smell of a body with a hole in it was worse than the burnt smell.

From across the room, the bedroom door opened slightly. April peeked around the opening. "Izzy?" she whispered. "Izzy?"

"It's all right," he said, but he wasn't so sure. Where was the other girl? Was she like the burnt thing in the kitchen? "You and Kimmy all right?"

"Yes. What—"

"Call the police. I'll be right there."

April's head disappeared back into the darkness.

He retrieved his guitar. The skin had burned its way through the top part of the neck, so he broke that part off. But it would still make a good weapon, albeit voltless, if the other one came back. As he limped toward the bedroom, he picked clumps of waxy, black flesh off the remainder of the neck.

April and Kimmy hugged him when he came into the bedroom. He tried not to wince, but he could feel pieces of glass stuck in his back. April sat him down on the bed. She kissed his lips lightly, told Kimmy to watch her Uncle Izzy, and went into the bedroom to get a wet washcloth.

He kissed Kimmy on the forehead and told her it'd be all right. She said she knew it would.

April's breasts had grazed his shirt when she kissed him.

He nearly swore he felt them shift slightly against his.

ANY REQUESTS?

The medium slumps in a chair
preparatory to leaving her body.
A twitch of her cheek,
a hitch of her torso,
and another entity slips in.
This human instrument,
possessed by an alien spirit,
plays unearthly music
conducted by the undead.

—THOMAS ROLLS

A CEMETERY DANCE

A sedentary prance,
Cemetery dance,
Etched upon my starkly staring eyes.
Madly tolling bells
Echo 'round the haunted dells
To reverbate into the endless sky.
Each ghostly, ghastly form
Right before me did perform
Yet the beauty of their dancing I'll deny
Despite the steps they did so well
Attuned with all the tolling bells
No one could stare as I and not descry,
Crypt-tenants dancing 'round, to see,
Each one, Dear God, looks just like me.

—JODY FOREST

DAVID B. SILVA INTERVIEW



David B. Silva has delighted followers of the horror genre for many years with his short fiction, novels, and his top-notch magazine, THE HORROR SHOW. He is a talented writer of many faces, his sensitive and moody style never fails to affect the reader's strongest emotions.

Dave was the first writer I queried after CEMETERY DANCE was born. To my surprise, he replied in a matter of weeks. Several letters and phone conversations followed and, soon after, the interview was complete. Then, without my resorting to pathetic begging (which incidentally was Plan B), Dave sent me the chilling tale "Fury's Child" that accompanies this interview. That should tell you a good bit about David B. Silva as a person and as a solid supporter of small-press horror. It was an honor and a privilege to work with Dave (if letters and phone calls can be classified as work) and I only hope my readers have as much fun learning about him as I did. ED

CEMETERY DANCE How long have you been writing? Was there any special moment in your life when you knew writing was going to be your career?

DAVID B. SILVA I wrote my first short story in high school in 1967. The idea behind it was wonderfully original within my personal sphere of experience at the time, yet hopelessly cliché now that I've read a little more in the field (something about a guy waking up to a nuclear war only to discover it was a terrible dream, only to wake up to a nuclear war). After that, for a number of years, most of the writing I did was in the form of grant proposals, project evaluations, and office

memos. Very dry, buzz-word material that was more fluff than substance. It wasn't until late in 1982 that I began to get serious about writing fiction. I'm still hoping it'll turn out to be my career.

C D : What was your first sale/acceptance? Did you experience immediate success or was it a difficult journey?

D B S : My first sale was a story called "Game Zone" which was published in the second issue of OWLFLIGHT, a small-press magazine out of Oakland. It was the first story I had written since high school, and OWLFLIGHT was the first magazine to see it. A nice way to start, though it made the whole business seem much easier than it is. There were lots of rejections that followed. Many from the pro magazines like PLAYBOY and OMNI and TWILIGHT ZONE (none of which I've yet been able to crack). And many from the small-press field. But it quickly became obvious that there was more encouragement and support coming from small press, so I eventually focused most of my efforts there.

C D : Of your two novels, Child of Darkness and Come 13, which was the most difficult to write? Which is your favorite?

D B S : Well, to be honest, my skills as a writer weren't well enough developed to tackle the subject matter of Child of Darkness. So, while I didn't find it appreciably more difficult to write, I fully realize that my effort to explore multiple personalities was rather retarded. I'm still intrigued by the subject matter of Child of Darkness. Still have a fondness for the unexplored avenues it opened up. But to cheat a little in answering your question: the novel I'm working on is always the most difficult to write. And there are no favorites.

C D : Do you use an outline when writing a novel or just write from scratch?

D B S : I don't think I could write without an outline. At least not novels. I rarely use an outline for my short stories. But with a novel, there's so much more territory to explore. I like to have a rough idea of the scope and the layout even though I'm fully aware that it will change. There are surprises in every book, and almost every short story. Little things which I had no suspicion about before they suddenly appeared on the page. Sometimes in the form of characters. Sometimes in the form of effect or story. So I outline, and the outline becomes the three scoops of ice cream on the bottom of the sundae: chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry. And the surprises become the whipped cream on top.

C D : Do you work on one novel at a time or several projects simultaneously?

D B S : I generally focus my attention on one book at a time. Though ideas for future projects are always kicking around inside my head. And I won't hesitate to work on a short story while writing a novel, or several short stories simultaneously. Quite honestly, I'd like to try juggling more projects at one time, just to help keep my curiosity and my imagination fired up.

C D : What is your next novel about? Any hints? What other writing projects are in the works?

D B S : The next book, Extremities, revolves around a new life form that has crossed from a meta-physical environment into the physical world. It can't maintain its physical state, though, and can only survive short stints in our world. The intersection of this new life form with the characters in the book, all struggling to survive in one manner or another, serves as the significant breath of

the book. I'm trying with each new book to challenge myself a little more, and I believe this one will do just that. At least I hope it will. I'm fully aware that I still have an enormous amount to learn about this craft of writing.

CD : What are your writing habits? Day or night? Music?

DBS : My writing habits vary with the seasons. I live on a relatively tight budget. I live in the mountains, about 3,000 foot elevation. In the winter it's cold and I use a floor heater in my office while I work—generally from about 9 am to 5 pm. In the summer, it gets terribly hot. I'll work from 9 pm or 10 pm to 1:30 pm or so. Stop. Then work again at night. Starting around 9 pm or 10 pm and generally finishing between midnight and 1 am. I write when it's most comfortable. And I listen to music most of the time; mostly new age music (Tangerine Dream, Kitaro, Giles Reeves, Rick Miller, The World of Private Music) because I find it helpful instead of distracting.

CD : Have you ever experienced writer's block? If so, how do you overcome it?

DBS : For nearly a year now, I've been battling with something that certainly wears the same face as writer's block. It's not an inability to come up with new ideas. Of those, I have thousands. But it seems to be a dissatisfaction with everything that ends up on the page. My expectations at this point appear to have exceeded my talent, so I'm trying to back off a little, to give myself the room to be a little sloppy in the first draft. Until recently, I only did a single draft, re-writing each new page until I felt it was perfect. Now, I'm training myself to write in three drafts, each one a little more demanding than the previous. The jury's still out.

CD : You have been called a horror writer with sensitivity? Where does this "soft touch" come from? Is it a conscious technique?

DBS : The soft touch is what I most wanted to bring to my horror fiction. It's very deliberate. I'm delighted that readers feel I'm succeeding. Still, I have a ways to go before it's as effective an approach as I envision it. We'll have to wait and see if I can push it as far as I'd like to.

But before I move on, I want to clarify a point here. Having a sensitive or soft-touch approach as you call it, doesn't mean that I write "quiet" horror. I strive to give my stories as much emotional impact as I possibly can. For me, the most effective way to accomplish that impact is by being strongly sensitive to my characters. That doesn't always result in a clean, bloodless story though. Certainly not a story with little more than a sense of horror: the creeping fog, the broken twig, etc. Sensitive, I hope so. Obliquely quiet, I pray not.

CD : Which do you find more satisfying: short fiction or novels?

DBS : They're both quite different forms of communication. I suspect that at this stage of the game, I'm a better short story writer than novelist. Though each story still presents its own unique problems for me. The two forms provide different states of gratification, so it's hard to favor one over the other. I find myself struggling much more with my novels because I have trouble maintaining my intensity for a long stretch of time. But when a novel's complete, there's nothing quite like the pride you feel. To answer your question more directly: no favorites.

CD : Do you enjoy horror films? Which have you especially liked? Disliked?

DBS : I love horror films. Even enjoy sitting through the bad ones. My personal preferences run

the field, with the possible exception of slasher films and overdone gore. I'll sit through those kinds of films, but they rarely scare me and rarely involve me emotionally. Films that I've enjoyed (with no justification beyond the fact that they involved me): THE HITCHER, WOLFEN, FRIGHT NIGHT, SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES, CUJO, THE THING, DEAD ZONE, MAGIC, PHANTASM, ALIENS, THE OTHER, THE LOST BOYS, and probably fifty or sixty others. I live out in the sticks, so it isn't always possible, but I try to catch a movie at least once a week.

C D : What writers in the horror field do you read and/or admire?

D B S : I read as many authors as possible. It's important to read both inside and outside the field. Every once in awhile I'll burn out on horror and have to put it aside for six or seven months (which I spend reading mysteries or suspense or science fiction). But I always come back to it. In answer to your question, I read everyone from John Saul (yes, I confess) to Charles L. Grant to Stephen King. I most admire the storytelling of Dean R. Koontz, Robert R. McCammon, and F. Paul Wilson. I most admire the characterizations of Stephen King; the voice of Joe R. Lansdale; the poetic beauty of Ray Bradbury. The list could go on forever. There's enormous talent out there.

C D : What is happening with THE HORROR SHOW now? Changes or improvements? Was THE BEST OF THE HORROR SHOW a success?

D B S : THE HORROR SHOW is at a crucial point in its history. In the next six months or so it will have the opportunity to see some outstanding growth and if the growth pays off, then I think you'll begin to see some significant improvements. Most likely in the areas of graphics, paper quality, and color. As for the contents, I'm pleased for the most part. If money permits, I'd like to expand both the fiction and non-fiction, as long as I can continue to maintain the current level of quality and freshness. I'll just have to see how it goes.

It's too early to say about THE BEST OF THE HORROR SHOW. It's my understanding that the publisher feels sales are a little slow, though he expects the book to sell out. As for its reception, I've heard relatively little from readers, so I don't know what they're thinking. Personally, with only a shred of bias, I think it's a solid book, well worth the price; and I've got a second volume put together now, ready for my agent to show to potential publishers. I'd like to put a new volume out every year or two if possible. Like everything else in this business: we'll see.

C D : What advice would you give to a writer trying to break through in the horror genre?

D B S : Read, read, read. Write, write, write. Submit, submit, submit. That's all there is to it. Three little steps. Read everything you can get your hands on. Read with the eye of a writer. Then write every chance you get, and keep writing no matter what. Then put your work in the mail, and get back to the typewriter. More than talent, becoming a writer takes undying persistence.

CROW WEATHER

Crow weather--bleak,
yet battlefield steaming--
night after killing.
The armies rest
in tents by the river
while crows pick bodies,
make, from death-glazed eyes,
windows for moonlight.

--James S. Dorr

FURY'S CHILD

Nick Fury should have been dead.

The Angel of Death had come for him, singing his name above the music, and he should have been ready to follow. He knew that. And if asked about it, he would say that he heard the calling of his name, but the caller hadn't been the Angel of Death at all; the caller had been his mother. And when he went to her, she turned her back on him.

He should have been dead.

The day it happened—the day of the experience—was the second day of a relentless storm. Nick was alone in his basement, searching for a new sound on his '69 Les Paul. He didn't read music, had never cared enough to learn, never had an appetite for the complex mathematical correlations that seemed to permeate musical structure. Instead, he let his fingers wander up and down the fretboard, skipping and dancing at will until something interesting finally came along, some small riff that captured his imagination. Then he would play on it, building it up, tearing it down until eventually it took on a magic of its own.

Close to a new sound, he had taken only cursory notice of the thin sheen of water that had seeped into the basement, covering the concrete floor like an acrylic wax. At that moment, the only thing on his mind was his music. For the first time in a long time, the notes seemed to be coming easily. Then suddenly something went sour. There was an explosion of feedback, which sent a shot of pain screaming through his headphones. It happened so fast, he hardly gave his reaction a second thought. Instinctively, he ripped the cord out of the Marshall amp.

The overhead lights dimmed, then climbed back to full illumination.

For a moment, he thought he could hear the air in the basement spark, something like the crackle of static electricity. Then he looked down at his hand and realized his thumb had turned black and he couldn't feel his fingers.

An instant later, Nick Fury took leave of his body.

It was beautiful, he would say much later.

He found himself outside his body, locked into an ethereal self which was free-floating near the basement ceiling. It was the strangest sensation he'd ever experienced, a feeling of both fear and euphoria. He hovered there a short time before two clear thoughts slowly set in. First, he realized that the pain in his hand had disappeared. More than that, he realized he was experiencing no physical sensation at all. And second . . . second, it occurred to him that he must be dead.

That last thought barely had a chance to settle in before he suddenly found himself floating above the house, outside now, in the black night, the house growing smaller and smaller. There was a silver umbilical cord connecting him to the basement, stretching out behind him like an endless kite string. He soared deeper into the night, into space, like a rocket launched from Cape Kennedy, the Earth resembling a shrinking blue marble. It felt fantastic, the feeling so encompassing, so completely euphoric he never wanted it to end.

In a way, it never did.

Far beyond the corner of the universe, he found himself standing at the mouth of a long tunnel. There was a point of blue light radiating warmly from the far end. He moved toward it, the sensation like floating, and at the other end of the tunnel, he looked out upon a heaven of soft, peaceful light.

"Nickie."

Out of the brilliant light, he could see the faint outline of a shadow-cast figure approaching. Swirling around her head, there were crisp sparkling colors of blue and yellow and red, making it appear as if her hair had been set on fire. She opened her arms to him, lovingly, moving closer, and suddenly he realized who she was, this woman from beyond the brilliant blue light. She was his mother.

As she approached, it felt as though a charge of pure energy were passing between them, something that felt almost like perfection itself. He realized something about the nature of existence at that moment. There were no final judgements, no video tape review of life's

sins and good deeds. One point each. Which way do the scales lean? Heaven? Or hell? There was none of that. There was, instead, a simple unequivocal acceptance.

Then suddenly she stopped. Her eyes were bright silver, her cheeks soft and smooth. She looked younger than he remembered her.

"Mom?"

She seemed distracted by something. She stood there a moment, her face expressionless, her hands open, then she started to turn back toward the blue brilliance. "I'm sorry, Nickie," she said, almost in a whisper. "Not this time."

Behind her, Nick saw the dark silhouette of something moving. It appeared to lay a black, deformed hand on his mother's shoulder, gently coaxing her back into the near-blinding light.

Nick called out to her.

The mouth of the light tunnel seemed to open wider.

Then everything went black.

When Nick woke the next day, he found himself lying in a hospital bed.

The basement had since dried out.

Sunlight was pouring in through the small windows that ran along the line of the ceiling. Two of the windows were open in an attempt to rid the cement-blocked room of the dank, musty odor which still lingered from the rains. Along one basement wall, a row of husky speaker cabinets stood shoulder-to-shoulder like watchful bodyguards. Nick Fury was sitting on the edge of an orange crate, wearing an old pair of tennis shoes, comforting the Les Paul in his lap.

"Just for a few hours," Sadie pleaded. Her hands were tucked in the pockets of her jeans, her back pushed up against the cold cement wall as if she were too frightened to venture any closer. She tried to smile, but couldn't seem to hold herself to it. Still, she looked beautiful. "What's the harm?"

"You don't understand," Nick said, without looking up. His thumb ran absently over a soft A-minor chord, then let the room fall silent again. He wished she would go away and leave him alone.

"I'm trying to understand."

"You can't imagine what it was like."

"Just an hour, Nickie. That's all I'm asking. You're gonna freak if you stay locked in this damn basement much longer. Just an hour." She glanced out the window at the blue

sky. "We can go for a walk along the beach, and get fresh air into your lungs."

He stared at her for a moment, knowing what he wanted to say but not knowing how to say it. "You know what they believe, Sadie? Our illustrious doctors? They claim that at the moment of death the brain dumps all its endorphins into the body. That's how they explain it. That's supposedly why I didn't feel any pain, why I . . . hallucinated."

"Is that so unreasonable?"

"Yes." He turned away again. His fingers routinely tickled a muffled run of notes on the guitar. "It explains it away too easily. When I stood at the edge of the tunnel and saw the light at the other end, it was as if I were standing right on the very edge of the universe . . . as if it were my universe. Everything was perfect. Absolutely perfect."

"Nickie, please."

"And in my mind, I heard music like nothing you've ever heard before. The harmonies—there were layers of overlapping harmonies, building then dying, then building again—and they reached out and touched something within me, something within every goddamn cell of my body. I could feel myself as part of the music. I could actually feel myself as part of the music." He paused, and for an awful moment he could see that black, deformed something that had stood behind his mother and pulled her back into the brightness. He shuddered, the vision disappeared, and he looked to Sadie, wishing he could describe the peacefulness he had felt while standing in the blue light. "It was something I have to experience again, Sadie."

She couldn't match the intensity of his gaze; her own gaze drifted self-consciously to the floor. "Just a short walk?"

"I don't think so."

Slowly, his attention drifted away from her, back to the guitar in his lap, back to his long, thin fingers which were resting on the strings, impatient to get on with the matter at hand. Then he played a chord, and another, and that was the end of the words between them. Sadie slipped quietly out of the basement, without notice, and Nick was left alone, his head full of dancing colors and sounds that sang to him like nothing he had ever imagined before the experience or might ever imagine again.

He spent fourteen days, every living moment of two weeks, locked in the cold of the

basement with the sounds of rain coming and going outside, always seeming to crowd into his head between the notes and chords that sprinkled and hailed and snowed through his imagination in endless, sometimes meaningless, combinations. At times, when his fingers were frozen over the strings by a temporary exhaustion, Nick would find himself back with his mother in a field of blue light. She would reach out for him again, call his name, then something black and misshapen would reach out from behind her and pull her back into the blue light.

Those were the times when he felt most frustrated with his inability to duplicate his experience on the other side. He felt trapped then, in the womb of a world that kept its inhabitants sheltered from their own potential. Sometimes it felt as if he were a child again, exploring something as awesome and wondrous as an old oak hollow. Something unbelievably fantastic resided on the other side, just out of reach, and he had to get to it.

It went on that way.

Day after day.

And after awhile, his fifth set of strings wore thin and much too giving. At times, every note he played seemed like a mimic of the note before it, every chord the chord before it. Until . . .

. . . the fifteenth day.

On that day, late in the afternoon, Nick found the final note and his work was suddenly, surprisingly finished. He sat back on the orange crate, leaning up against the cinder-block wall, and played through the music one additional time, getting what he had been yearning for ever since that day when he'd nearly electrocuted himself: a trip back to the after-life. He floated into space again, like a kite, trailing a silver-threaded umbilical cord behind him, out beyond the universe to where the long dark tunnel began, to the brilliant blue light, to the feeling of utterly complete peace.

When it was done, he put aside the Les Paul, smiled and felt dreamy. It was his most important work, a powerful piece of music that grew almost subliminally from the depths of his subconscious mind, softly slipping into existence without so much as a whisper before it was there, undeniably there. The music had spilled softly from his guitar, like a warm gentle breeze, gradually growing more intense with each new note, ever more soul-shaking, until it peaked at the height of its crescendo—

that moment when he had stood at the far lip of the tunnel and looked out at the blinding blue light for the very first time—and then the keyboards slipped quietly in beneath the harmonics like the soft distant song of a whale.

In celebration, he scraped away the thick rubble which had grown too familiar to his face; he showered and ate and changed his clothes and brushed his teeth, then he called the first, perhaps the only, person in the world with whom he felt an honest need to share his music.

Sadie came without asking questions.

She always came without asking questions.

"I realize it's been two weeks," he said as he held the basement door open for her. "I know I should have called you. But something special's happened, Sadie."

She smiled appreciatively. "I've missed you."

"Come in. Come in," he said, motioning her across the threshold of the door. "I want you to listen to this. I want you to tell me if it does anything if you can . . . feel the music."

"You've finished a new song?"

"No, it's more than that. Much more than that." He strapped the Les Paul over his shoulder. Sadie sat down on the nearest orange crate, her dimples showing through. At times like this, when she would come to listen to his music, she was the purest form of innocence. "Just listen," he told her. "See if you understand."

In the background, a tape began to softly slither through the magnetic heads. His guitar sang gently in response. For almost thirty minutes, Nick held his soul out to her, cupped in the hands of his music, music that peaked and ebbed and swept them both up in its currents like fragile paper dolls. When he had finished there was a long period of silence.

Then a tear slipped from the corner of Sadie's eye and she cried softly. "It's beautiful," she said.

"Thank you."

"And I think I understand now."

"I hoped you would."

Later, as he closed the basement door behind her, Nick smiled and slapped an open palm against the cinder-block wall. He had done it. He had taken her through the tunnel to the other side, let her stand on the edge of the brilliant blue light and feel what it was like to be free of her physical shackles. He had showed the limitless potential of the soul, then he had



brought her back again, and she had cried.

His excitement lasted only a few hours though.

Sadie had left floating. Not drugged-out like he had sometimes found her, but flying high from the experience, flying high like he had felt, like a glimpse of soft-blue light could leave a person. Her smile had been little more than a serene crack across her face. Her eyes had seemed hollow and distant. But she had walked away from him like a bird set free—fulfilled and at peace.

Then she had taken a cab to the Golden Gate Bridge.

Nick could almost see the cool bay winds mussing her hair as he imagined what it must have been like.

She had walked along the bridge, smiling to someone or something that wasn't there, running her fingers along the cable when the opportunity arose, glancing out into the ocean blue that brought back memories of another blue— a blue that was suddenly an obsession to her, that hadn't stopped calling to her since she had heard the first notes, the first chords of . . .

Then she had climbed onto the railing, and she had looked out over the endless blue, and she had jumped to her death.

Suddenly, for Nick, the blue light had donned a new mask.

It was an aspect of his experience that he had somehow lost sight of, a consideration he had let drift too far from mind. He had stood on the edge of the blue light and his fear of death had washed away. Forever. But this was different. This was Sadie who had died. She had listened to his music, and it had taken her to her death.

Darkness had slipped through the foot windows by the time he stirred again. It was a darkness he had always expected death to be made of, a darkness that felt as if it might smother him if he let it. He thought about just that— letting the darkness choke off his breath until he found himself back at the mouth of the tunnel, with Sadie calling to him this time instead of his mother. He thought about it, but could do no more than give it thought.

Numbly, he pushed himself out of the corner that had consoled him for the bulk of the day. He felt his hands tremble, not from exhaustion this time, but from fear. And it was his own music that frightened him; his own

creation. He had killed Sadie— he knew that now— just as if he had taken his hands to her throat and squeezed the life out of her body. Only he had used his music in place of his hands. That goddamned music that only a day before had seemed like a godsend, had become something else entirely. Nick realized that now. His child wasn't a child at all, it was a monster.

He thought more than once about destroying it.

But in the end, after he had torn the tape from the recorder, had held the reel in his angry, trembling hands, he realized he couldn't burn it. It was, again, the most important piece of work he had ever written . . .

So he locked the tape in a vault hidden behind the stand of speaker cabinets lining the basement walls. He locked it there along with his visions of the otherside. He locked it there for what he intended would be forever.

Nick lost time after that day. He lost it to twice-a-day phone calls from his manager, demanding a single note, a single chord, something, anything— you're losing your following, Nickie. People stop caring, stop wondering, if you don't stay visible. He lost time to white powder and nose bleeds, to long memory lapses, to self-pity. He lost it to a rabid-like preoccupation with the otherside, a preoccupation that chewed bit-by-bit at his peace of mind.

Nick Fury, ex-rock phenomenon, present day Keeper of Threshold. Self-antagonist. Coke junkie, because he saw too much. Extant, because he saw not enough.

There were occasions when the fog lifted from around him and he reached for his Les Paul, occasions when his fingers— brought to life by something deeper than memory— danced across the strings with a mind of their own. And he wondered absently at those times, what it had been that had reached out from the blue— brilliance and pulled his mother away from him as he stood at the threshold that day.

A thousand times, he thought: Sadie knows, doesn't she ?

Then he would close his eyes— his fingers beginning to play a pattern too familiar— and he would see an aura of soft laser blue around his vault.

Sadie knows .

And sometimes he would want to know too.

And sometimes his fingers would be itching to tell him.

ROCK OF AGES

John B. Rosenman teaches English and Creative Writing at Norfolk State University where he edits the school's lit/ art magazine. His fiction has appeared in/ been accepted by dozens of small-press publications including THE HORROR SHOW, NEW BLOOD, 2AM, STAR-SONG, THIN ICE, NOCTULPA, and SERENDIPITY. His science fiction novel, INSPECTOR OF THE CROSS, is under consideration at a publisher and a second novel, DREAMFARER, is on the way. Ellen Datlow, editor of OMNI, recently named "Rock of Ages" to her recommended reading list.

"Go through that door," the old man told him, "and you will see the most frightening thing in the world."

So Marsh went. Grasped the cold doorknob and turned, all the time kicking himself for a fool. Six tickets— a buck fifty— just to see this cheap county fair's idea of a fun house and capture a little nostalgia. As a kid he had loved fun houses, shrieked with delight at their paper-mache monsters that popped out of the darkness. Yes, he had loved sliding platforms and air holes that goosed you from below, loved jangling bells and trick mirrors that showed a universe gone mad. The only trouble was, he wasn't ten or eleven years old anymore, and for a man of forty-two to do such a childish thing . . .

He frowned halfway through the doorway. Yes, childish, and outside in the bright sun, his dour, barren, forty-five year old wife would be getting impatient, seeing nothing at all redeemable in his little stroll down memory lane. He could already hear her carping voice when he came out . . .

The door settled shut behind him.

Standing in the darkness, he sighed. Even though it was dark, he closed his eyes.

The most frightening thing in the world? Never heard that pitch before.

The thought made his eyes snap open. Most frightening thing . . . What could that be?

As if to tease and prolong the thought, an odor came. He caught his breath.

Even before he could name it, his body remembered the cloying sweetness of honey-suckle. Hands out, he groped his way forward.

A light . . . growing. Then colors: green, yellow, blue.

Sound of a brook, musical and sad.

Abruptly the scene expanded, like a kernel out of his . . . past.

Marsh screamed. The sound never reached his lips.

Before him, less than six feet away, he was making love to his wife.

Or rather, was about to. Stunned, he recognized the scene: a picnic twenty years before. Just Bette and he with cold fried chicken and deviled eggs packed in her basket. Plus a little Chianti which had loosened him up just enough . . .

He stiffened, watching Bette help him remove his trousers while she pushed down her panties. How could this be? This scene was from his past, and only he and Bette knew about it!

The most frightening thing in the world!

The old man's words echoed in his ears, and he felt a chill. What kind of a fun house was this? Was it the devil's home, or were darkness and the power of suggestion responsible for this apparition?

"Come on, Steve, hurry," Bette said.

"I'm excited."

He listened to his own tense voice respond. Saw Bette reach to guide him.

In a rush of fury, he remembered how she had used him. Clumsily, they had made love that day, and a few weeks later she had told him she was pregnant and they had hastily gotten married.

But she hadn't been pregnant, had she? No, not then, not ever. It was all just a lie and twenty years of marriage to a woman who was barren in more ways than one.

She had lied to him, lied to him, lied . . .

And now she was smiling in the sun as she started to rock beneath him. Was she laughing

at him, he wondered. Laughing even then?

His heart felt like ice; Steve Marsh stepped into the scene.

He stood on the green grass of that day, blinking in the sun. A yellow butterfly flew past, and he stepped around his own younger, hoarsely breathing body and looked down at her.

Bette gazed up into his eyes.

Twenty years younger, but her plain, stolid features hadn't changed much. What he wasn't prepared for, though, was the smug, self-absorbed glint in her eyes.

With a curse, he spun, spotted a rock. Before he knew what he was doing, he'd picked it up and moved forward, pushing himself off her. For the first time, she noticed him. He saw her start to scream . . .

He brought the rock down, again and again and again. Struck her till her face was a bloody pulp. After a long moment he rose and staggered away.

Trembling, he found himself at the door, the cold doorknob in his hand. He leaned weakly against it, then turned to look back.

Slowly, as he watched, the scene faded and was gone.

He sucked in his breath and numbly opened the door. Went out.

He stood in the short hallway he had entered by, feeling faint. After a couple of swallows, he lurched out into the sun.

It was as blinding as it had been twenty years before, and it took a minute for his eyes

to adjust. When they did, it was just in time for him to see a pretty, dark-haired woman smile at him. He noticed that there were two young children with her, a beautiful little boy and girl.

His heart thumped.

Twenty feet away, her smile kindled, and he felt something long buried start to respond. Irrationally, a small hope grew. Was it possible . . .

Eyes glistening, fixed on him, the woman came forward, holding a little hand in each of her own. As she approached, Marsh saw that she was years younger than Bette and knew instinctively that she loved life and like to laugh.

As he started for her, he felt the absurd hope spring fully into life. Insane or not, was it possible he had really killed Bette in there and changed the future? Had he somehow actually altered his destiny and won not only this stunning woman but two beautiful children as well?

She had almost reached him now. He reached out.

Then she was past him for somebody else and he was standing on hard cinders, feeling infinitely foolish and suddenly aware that he still clutched the rock in one hand. A moment later, when a finger tapped his shoulder, he was not surprised.

When he turned with the rock, though, he was. Just a little.

"Steve," she smiled, one eye gone and her face a mask of scar tissue, "you didn't think you had escaped me, did you?"

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THE DEPARTING OF DEBBIE

Anke M. Kriske has had more than 40 stories and a dozen poems accepted by publications such as 2AM, NEW BLOOD, GRUE, TWISTED, HAUNTS, SYCOPHANT, and DESERT SUN. Her western tale will appear in the upcoming WOMAN OF DARKNESS, an anthology edited by Kathryn Placek and to be published by Doubleday.

"That was good, wasn't it, baby?" Jim Conant asked, nibbling on the young woman's ear.

Debbie trembled beneath him. Her face, scarcely visible in the dark, was ghostly pale. "I don't feel so good all of a sudden," she replied in a small voice. She gasped, her eyes starting from their sockets. "Jim . . ." She dug her nails deep into his bare arms.

"Hey!" He rammed his rump into the steering wheel.

The veins in Debbie's neck stood out against her white skin, her arms flailed as she tried to swallow air.

"What is it?" Her legs were still wrapped around his waist and they tightened like pincers. "What's wrong?"

Her back arched. Her face turned red, then purple. Froth sprayed out of her mouth.

"Breathe!" he commanded as if she were not at this moment struggling desperately to do so. He shook her. Her head snapped back and forth but her congested face did not clear. He hit her, again and again, until streaks of blood mingled with her spittle. A rattling sound escaped from her throat. "You've got to breathe!" He clamped his mouth on hers and tried artificial respiration. He could feel her lungs expand. Once. She collapsed into a heap, eyes open, mouth agape.

"Debbie?" Ludicrous to call her, but he did so mindlessly. He felt for her pulse. There was none. He put his ear to her chest. Not a murmur of a heartbeat. "She's d . . . dead." In a panic he grabbed the handle of the door and tumbled ignobly out into the empty field.

The cold air restored him to senses. A high school science teacher of forty-one could not go running naked around the countryside while an equally naked dead woman, most certainly not his wife, lay in his Dodge.

Conant conquered his fear and took a closer look at his late lover. The dome light illuminated her bleached hair and red nails; it might be his imagination but her body, so enticingly svelte only minutes ago, already looked like a gray cadaver. As long as he had known her, an entire three weeks, she had complained of occasional dizziness. She must have died from some sort of seizure. Would anybody believe that, though?

He weighed the evidence. Their love-making sessions had been rough. Tonight she had bitten him on the shoulder. There were scratches on her back, not to mention the deep gouges on his arm produced as she embarked on her journey to death. Their clothes were strewn all over the seats. One of her cheap little gold-plated earrings was missing. There was an assortment of bodily fluids on the cloth upholstery of the car.

Given the circumstances, one could make a most unpleasant interpretation of the facts. Presumably an autopsy would reveal what had actually killed her, but what if the police said she had heart failure while being attacked? That was a problem, for even if he wasn't convicted of a crime, his wife would leave and he would undoubtedly be out of a job.

"I'll have to hide the body." Where, though? He didn't want to go driving far with a corpse in his trunk. The entire town was rife with developers, so if he buried her nearby she would undoubtedly pop up in a year or so.

"The school!"

It was the ideal solution. Fortunately his wife was visiting an out of town fat farm for the weekend and couldn't question his late hours. He rummaged around for his pants and shirt, dressed, ran his fingers through the graying brown hair to tidy his appearance. Then he

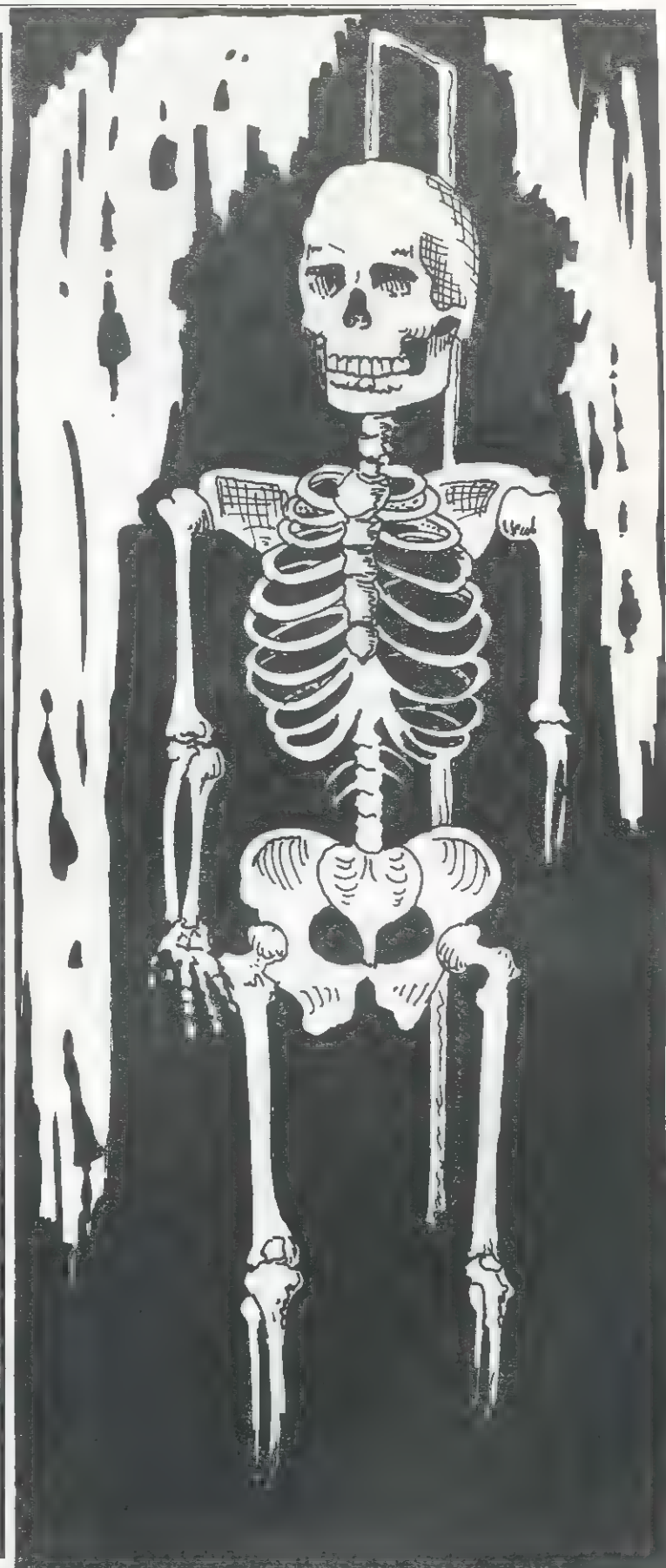
cautiously pulled out of the field behind the baseball diamond.

Warren G. Harding High School was an old stone building erected before the late president had been tied to scandal. It stood three stories tall and had been constructed in such a way as to have the maximum number of small, dark, poorly ventilated rooms. His lab was in the basement, between the art room and the boiler. Fortunately the building was always deserted at night. To think that he had almost listened to his wife and not accepted a volunteer position to help coach the track team. The team practiced after school and since they needed to get to the locker rooms, Conant had been given a key.

He unlocked the side door, momentarily propping Debbie against the railing. Then he pulled her in after him and relocked the door. The dimness of the overhead lights muted Debbie's convulsed features. He dragged her down the stairs, her feet making little thunking sounds every time they hit a new step, and into the hallway with its scuffed floor. The boiler room hummed.

Conant reached the safety of the lab, turned on one of the overhead lights, and pulled the increasingly uncooperative body of Debbie to the aluminum sink. The fit might be a problem. Debbie was a tall girl, with long limbs the pudgy teacher had loved to caress. He held her by the waist, took a deep breath, and hoisted her up. A little pushing and bending and he had her sitting comfortably, her head resting on her drawn-up knees, arms hanging by her side. She didn't topple over when he left her to gather equipment. It took him a good fifteen minutes of diligent searching in his supply closet to find what he was looking for: hydrolic acid. He didn't have enough for an entire body, the school budget being particularly tight this year, but it should take care of the incidentals. He took out rubber gloves and an apron, an abundance of paper towels and rags, and knives usually used in dissection of those horrid little frogs he so detested.

"I'm really sorry," he told her as he put on the apron and the gloves. He raised one of the knives. "Can I do this?" he asked. It wasn't as if Debbie could object, but his stomach might. He swallowed and advanced toward his patient. He began by making a deep incision across her back and two down. Gingerly he peeled the flesh away, exposing the network of veins and muscles and bone beneath the skin. How fasci-



nating Debbie was even in death. Conant was reminded of some of the anatomical studies he had done when he himself had been a student. "Latissimus dorsi, gluteus medius." He worked carefully, delicately, slicing away the soft, slimy tissue. "Let me see," he said, harvesting the internal organs. "Adrenal glands, diaphragm, gall bladder." Bit by bit the pieces of Debbie mounted in the metal trays.

She no longer took up as much space in the sink. Conant tilted her head back. "Sternomastoid," he whispered as he made a neat incision just below her jaw. "Frontalis temporal masseter." Quite skillfully he removed her face and hair in one complete unit. "I never knew I had so much talent." Holding the skull with one hand, he separated the head from the spine. Her skeleton, somewhat messy at this stage, collapsed into a tighter bundle. Conant took his coffee spoon, the only appropriate instrument he had handy, and scooped out the brain. "Medulla, cerebellum, cerebrum." He poured some of the acid inside the cavity, swished it around, and after running water over the white bone, set the skull on the sinkboard to dry. He used most of the acid to clean away the flesh still clinging to the skeleton.

Some parts of Debbie he dissolved with the remaining acid in the vat, some he flushed, others he fed to the garbage disposal in the cafeteria. It took several hours, but Debbie was reduced to mere skeleton. He respectfully laid her clean bones on his desk.

"And now for my crowning achievement." He stepped back, assuming his lecturing pose. "Do you know the best place to hide a book? Correct, in the library. And a body? No, not in the cemetery. It's right by the highway and five minutes from the police station." He yanked open a metal cabinet. "Voila," he said with a flourish. The skeleton in the cabinet clanked as it was shaken. "This is Clyde. You will observe that Clyde has been around for a number of years. He's been kidnapped as part of a Halloween prank, painted blue, had gum stuck in his eye sockets, and tumbled down a flight of stairs as he was transferred to my classroom. His bones are brittle and chipped, ready to fall apart because he was so crudely mounted in the first place. For years I've been asking for a new model." He shrugged. "You, my sweet, are going to replace him."

When Debbie's bones had been polished with a rag, Conant took old Clyde out of the cabinet and with a hammer broke him apart.

The remains he put in a plastic shopping bag and pounded diligently until only powder and chips remained. Then Conant began the arduous task of stringing the wire through Debbie. He started with her feet. "Phalanges, the metatarsal, the tarsal." Twenty years of teaching anatomy had prepared him well. "The fibula, tibia, patella, femur." His mind felt fuzzy from fatigue, but he had to put her back together correctly. The students would notice a mistake. By dawn, she was hanging in her new home.

His lips twitched. "No one," he said softly, "will ever look for you here. You can watch me while I work, and on those horrible lonely afternoons when I'm correcting papers I can look up and see you . . . as you once were, of course."

He picked up Clyde and returned to his car. Debbie's clothes were neatly stacked on the seat beside him. Conant drove first to her run-down hotel room, where he slipped her key and a twenty dollar bill into an envelope and shoved it under the manager's door. No one would be surprised at her abrupt departure. The clothes he deposited in a bin belonging to a charity store.

Conant looked at his watch as he approached his simple two-story frame house. It was now six. He had only an hour. He showered, shaved, and mixed Clyde with the bone meal he planned to spread on the garden next month. One quick check in the mirror and he was gone. "Jim," he said with admiration as he climbed into the car, "I didn't know you could be so cool."

A few students were arriving by various routes as he pulled into the parking lot. He exchanged friendly banter with them. In a way he was relieved that Debbie was gone. She could have been trouble in the long run.

Conant meticulously examined his room to make sure he hadn't left any incriminating evidence lying about. He couldn't find a single spot of blood. His chest swelled with pride, again and again he congratulated himself on his cunning. His mind slid into exhausted euphoria.

Conant opened the cabinet. The world was a little out of focus and yet his mind seemed sharper than it had ever been. As he studied the lines of her hard, white form, the most pleasant sensation emanated from his groin. He smiled broadly. "You still look lovely to me, my sweet." He placed a hand over her pelvis. "I know you only thought of me as a source of

money, but I think we had fun together." Somewhat belatedly, he realized how much she meant to him. It was comforting to know that she would be near.

There was a sound of footsteps and Conant looked over his shoulder. His students were arriving. "Good morning," he said and turned to close the cabinet. It would be a pity, though, to hide her away. He left the door open.

So it went for the remainder of the semester. Conant would arrive early, have a brief conversation with Debbie, and begin his duties. The days were now more pleasant. She reminded him of his virility, of his daring, of his brilliance. Who else could hide a body in the open? Who else would have had the courage? He smiled a great deal.

Conant was pondering what to do with Debbie over the summer break, only days away, when he arrived to find another science teacher in the room.

"Hello, Jim," Mrs. Quigley said with characteristic cheerfulness. "Bought you an early Christmas present." She pulled a new skeleton out of a heavy plastic bag.

He looked quickly to the cabinet.

"It's gone. I had the janitor . . ."

"What!" He rushed from the room and ran down the insufferably crowded hall, rapidly filling with students. He burst through the heavy metal door of the boiler room.

Debbie lay crumpled in a box with assorted paper refuse.

The janitor, a frail man in his fifties, picked up the box and turned to the open incinerator. "Got a problem."

Conant looked down at the last of Debbie. Wasn't that what he wanted, Debbie to be gone completely, to remove the last trace of threat?

"No," he whispered. He wanted to keep his Debbie. He needed her to prove his prowess, to confirm his cleverness. If she were gone, he'd be nothing again. Just another second rate high school teacher. He reached for her.

"What do you think you're doing?" the janitor protested.

"Get away from me!"

"That stuff has got to be burned."

"It's mine!"

"What, that disgusting old skelton? It's school property and I've been told to burn the damn thing?" He tried to shove the box into the incinerator.

"No, no, no!" Conant screamed, grabbing the janitor's arm. Debbie fell to the floor.

"You are not to touch Debbie!" He pounded at the man with his fists.

They took Debbie away. Cremated her in the school incinerator. Conant's wife, his principle didn't understand. Neither does his new psychiatrist.

Jim Conant sits in his bed in the mental ward and smiles because he continues to out-smart the rest. Unknown to his adversaries, he still has a part of Debbie, a finger purloined with great cunning. They don't allow the patients to have pockets, so he keeps her hidden in his mouth.

WITNESS TO THE BIZARRE



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THE JANITOR

Bentley Little's horror fiction has appeared in NIGHT CRY, THE HORROR SHOW, CAVALIER, NEW BLOOD, 2 AM and many other top magazines. His story, "Looney Tune" was recently nominated for a Bram Stoker Award. Bentley is one of my personal favorites in the genre and, in my opinion, a safe bet to make it "big."

Steven stood alone at the edge of the playground, looking around at his new school. All around him, boys were playing on swings, slides and monkey bars, starting impromptu games of tackle and freeze tag. Girls were playing tetherball and four square and hopscotch. Everywhere kids were talking and laughing and catching up on school friends they hadn't seen over the summer.

Steven thought of walking out into the playground, maybe trying to swing on a swing, but he didn't want to feel any more conspicuous than he did already. And he didn't want to make any enemies the first day. Everyone hated new kids who tried to push their way into a group of longtime friends. He would simply head toward class, walking slowly. By the time he got there, the bell would probably have rung.

He turned around and almost ran into the janitor, pushing a long flat broom across the sidewalk in front of the principal's office. The janitor, an old stooped man with a ring of sparse greyish hair around his bald sunburned dome, smiled at him. His teeth were too long and slightly crooked. His nostrils were huge in his wide flat nose, giving him an almost pig-like appearance. "New?" the janitor asked.

Steven nodded. His eyes met the janitor's for a second and looked immediately away. The old man's eyes were hard, mean.

"Welcome to Sunnycrest," the janitor said, holding out his hand. "My name's Mr. Chiles."

Steven took the proffered hand and felt a tremor of disgust course through him. The janitor's weathered palm was cold and greasy. He tried to smile at the old man but didn't quite

succeed. "I'm glad to meet you," he stammered.

"No you're not," the janitor said, laughing, "but you will be."

The bell rang immediately after that and Steven, grateful, started off toward his classroom, holding tight to his lunchpail.

He was the first one there.

Steven stared at the bulletin board on the side wall of the classroom as Mrs. Manning met with the slow reading group at the front of the class. They didn't call the reading groups slow, middle and fast at this school, the way they had at his other school. They called them group one, group two and group three. But it was obvious even to him which group was which.

The bulletin board was filled with student artwork—watercolor paintings. Only the best paintings in the class had been chosen for the bulletin board. Steven saw the name of Melissa Nichols, the blond girl who sat across from him, above a painting of a blue cloudless sky and oversized yellow sunflowers. Next to that was a picture of a rocket heading toward the moon, and next to that was a picture of a green monster with long, pointed teeth.

The monster was pushing a broom.

Steven glanced around the classroom then turned back toward the painting, examining it more closely. The watercolor picture was crude, but he could tell from the ring of greyish hair around the monster's bald head that it was supposed to represent Mr. Chiles.

Small drops of blood were dripping from the monster's pointed fangs.

Timmy Turner, the short scrawny kid who sat next to him, tapped him on the shoulder. "Like it?" he asked. "It's mine." He grinned, revealing several missing teeth.

Steven looked toward the banked windows on the opposite side of the classroom and saw the janitor peering in through the plate glass, the old man's eyes boring into his own.

The janitor smiled and fiddled with a necklace of white teeth around his neck.

He picked up his broom and walked away.

"Okay," Mrs. Manning said, "who would like to take these over to the janitor and get them cleaned?" She held out the four chalk erasers that had been sitting along the metal edge of the blackboard.

No students raised their hands.

Steven looked around him, surprised and a little frightened. Getting the erasers cleaned had been a coveted job at his last school. Not only did you get out of work for taking the erasers in, but the black squares of felt also served as a hall pass and enabled you to walk freely around the school for awhile, wasting even more time before going back to class.

But here, no one wanted the job!

"Come on," Mrs. Manning said.

The janitor held up a long pair of shears. "I like to keep a memento from each of the students!"

Several students looked down at their desks, while the others glanced toward the windows. None met Mrs. Manning's gaze.

They were afraid, Steven realized. They were afraid to take the erasers to the janitor's room.

Mrs. Manning looked at him and smiled. "How about you Steven?"

Steven felt his heart pounding wildly in his chest. He did not like the janitor; he was afraid of him. But the fact that all of the other students were afraid of him as well scared him even more. He felt his mouth go dry. He shook his head silently.

"No?" Mrs. Manning asked kindly.

"I don't know where the janitor is," he said, licking his lips.

"Mr. Chiles' room is right next to the principal's office."

"I don't know where the principal's office is," he lied.

"Okay," Mrs. Manning said. "Eddie? You go!"

Eddie Trerise, his face pale, his hands shaking, accepted the erasers from the teacher and shuffled out of the class, not speaking.

He had not returned by lunchtime.

Lunch was not as bad as he'd thought it would be. He had imagined himself walking alone into the cafeteria and sitting by himself, eating self-consciously, while around him everyone laughed and joked with their friends. But they had walked to the cafeteria as a class, and he had ended up eating with Timmy Turner. Timmy, apparently, was not very popular, and Steven was grateful for that.

He had his first friend at Sunnycrest.

The two boys sat at the end of a long table, next to a group of giggling younger kids, eating what Timmy referred to as "barfaroni." Steven took a drink of his milk and thought for a moment. "That picture you painted," he said "was that supposed to be the janitor?"

Timmy laughed. "Could you tell?"

Steven nodded. "I met him this morning. Weird."

Timmy leaned forward confidentially, glancing around to make sure no one was listening. "He's crazy," he whispered.

Steven licked his lips, feeling his heart start to race again. "What do you mean crazy?"

"Crazy." Timmy grinned artificially, pointing to his missing teeth. "See those?" he said. "These weren't babyteeth. They didn't fall out. He took them. He pulled them out with his fingers when I went to get the erasers cleaned last week. He made them into a necklace."

Steven stared at the shorter boy, shocked. "Didn't you tell someone? Didn't you tell Mrs. Manning or the principal? They'd fire him. They'd put him in jail."

Timmy leaned forward even further. "They know," he whispered. "They're in on it."

"Well, didn't you tell your parents? I mean . . ."

"Tell them what? Who are they going to believe? Me or the entire school?"

"But they can see your teeth are gone . . ."

"Jenny Sontow tried to tell her parents. Now she's one of those missing kids on the back of milk cartons."

Steven felt a firm hand grip his shoulder and he jumped. He turned quickly around and stared into the pig-like snout of the janitor. The old man smiled. His breath was fetid, rotting. "Having a good lunch, boys?"

Timmy nodded, visibly shaken, visibly scared. His skin was pale, his eyes blinking

rapidly.

"Yeah," Steven said.

"Good," the janitor said. "I have to finish cleaning up the kitchen right now, but I'll be in my room for the rest of the afternoon." His hard gaze focused on Steven. "Come on by."

Steven shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Then maybe I'll see you after school. I'm always around somewhere." He lifted Steven's tray of food and used a damp cloth to wipe the table under it. He smiled, nodded and moved silently away.

Steven's hand went instinctively to his shoulder. It was greasy. He looked across the table at Timmy, but the smaller boy was gathering up his tray. "Hey . . ." he began.

Timmy held a finger to his lips and stood up, moving away.

Steven watched the other boy walk to the front of the cafeteria to drop off his tray and saw that two boys at the head of the long table were staring at him.

Both of the boys had broken arms.

Across the room, at a table opposite him, another boy, this one bald with red welts across the top of his shaved head, was looking in his direction.

Two girls walked by him, staring.

Both of them limped.

After lunch, Mrs. Manning met with the middle reading group and then started on math. The small black phone on the wall in back of her desk buzzed in the middle of her math lecture, and she stopped where she was and answered it. Her voice was too low for Steven to hear what she said.

"That was Principal Poole," she announced to the class after hanging up. "Eddie had to go home sick." Several kids in class exchanged significant looks. Steven caught Timmy's eye, but Timmy looked away. The teacher turned back to the blackboard, as if she were going to continue with her math lecture, then suddenly swiveled around. "Our erasers are still at the janitor's," she said, "being cleaned." Her eyes scanned the room. "Would someone like to pick them up for us?"

No one volunteered.

Mrs. Manning eyes rested on Steven. "You have to learn where things are in this school sometime," she said. "You go get the erasers."

"I don't know where . . ." Steven began, feeling the fear rise within him.

"Straight down the hall," Mrs. Manning said, smiling.

Slowly, aware that the eyes of his classmates were on him, Steven stood up, pushed in his chair and started for the door. Outside, the hall was long and deserted, the afternoon air warm and still. He forced himself to walk forward. He passed loud classrooms of happy, talking students. Out on the playground, he could hear a gym class.

He turned the corner at the end of the hall. The open door of the janitor's room stood before him. A light was on somewhere within the dim crowded shed, but he could not make anything out. As he drew closer, he saw rakes and brooms hanging against the wall next to the door.

There was no sign of the janitor.

He walked up to the open doorway and knocked on the wooden frame surrounding it. He peered in. "Mr. Chiles?" he said tentatively.

A strong cold hand grabbed the back of his neck and pushed him forward into the room. "Come in. I've been expecting you."

Inside the janitor's workroom there was nothing out of the ordinary. No nooses, no knives, no instruments of torture. Only garbage cans, rags, tools and cleaning implements. The janitor let go of Steven's neck, and Steven turned around. "Mrs. Manning wants me to pick up the erasers Eddie dropped off," he said quickly.

"Erasers?" the janitor said, digging through a pile on his workbench. "Erasers." He turned toward Steven. "How do you like your first day?"

"Fine."

"Make any friends yet?"

"Yes," Steven said.

The janitor nodded. "That's good, that's good."

Steven was aware of the absurdity of the conversation and he became increasingly nervous as the old man dug around through the tools and rags on his bench.

"Oh I know," the janitor said. "They're in the back. Come on." He pushed his way past a line of dirty aprons hanging from the ceiling and kicked over a pile of stacked wastepaper baskets. Steven saw that the room was much bigger than he had first thought. He watched the janitor disappear into the darkness. "Come on," the old man told him. "This way."

Afraid to follow the janitor into the

blackness, but even more afraid to disobey him, Steven followed. He walked under the line of aprons and past a wall lined with discarded file cabinets. The room was dark and getting increasingly darker. He could no longer see in front of him.

The janitor's hand grabbed his upper arm and held tight.

A light was switched on.

And, suddenly, he was in the old man's real workshop. Several necklaces of teeth and small bones hung from nails on the pegboard wall. Scalps, some untouched, others braided into macrame, were thrown over a low worktable. Shelves of mason jars and smaller babyfood jars lined the far wall. The jars were filled with red and white squishy things. Above an antique stove, suspended from the ceiling by twine, hung what looked like beef jerky.

In the center of the room was a large chopping block covered with blood, not all of it dried. And, on the chopping block, a torn piece of Eddie Trerise's shirt.

In the center of the room was a large chopping block covered with blood, not all of it dried.

And, on the chopping block, a torn piece of Eddie Trerise's shirt.

"NO!" Steven yelled. He struggled hard, trying to escape, but the janitor's iron grip held him fast. He used both of his hands to try and pry the cold greasy fingers apart, but they would not budge.

"Yes," the janitor said quietly, and Steven remembered what Timmy had told him. He's crazy! He turned around to look at the old man's face and saw that he was smiling. He could see the janitor's overlong teeth.

"YOU CAN'T DO THIS!" Steven screamed. "MY PARENTS 'LL ..."

"Your parents don't give a shit whether you live or die," the janitor said. His voice was smooth, low. "You live with your trampy momma, and your daddy lives up in Oregon."

Steven stared at the janitor in shock. How

could he know that? It wasn't possible. He struggled harder to get away. He kicked the janitor's leg as hard as he could, but it felt as though he had kicked a brick wall. The janitor had not even acknowledged the kick. His own foot hurt even through the tennis shoes.

"Oh my God," he blubbered. "Oh my God."

The janitor held up a long pair of shears. "I like to keep a memento from each of the students," he said. "Just a little something to remember them by." He chuckled. "Which is more important to you, your little finger or your toe?"

Steven screamed and kicked out at the janitor. His foot hit the metal shears, and the shears went flying, coming to a clattering halt on the concrete floor. The janitor turned around, bending over to pick up the shears, and let go of Steven for a second. The boy grabbed a mason jar and crashed it down hard on the old man's bald head.

The janitor stood up, blood and clear liquid rolling down his face. But none of the blood was his. The shattering glass had not even broken the skin.

The janitor was no longer smiling.

"You've broken the rules, boy. Now you're mine. The school doesn't want trouble-makers." He started panting. "Now you're all mine."

One hand clamped hard around Steven's neck and he was lifted high into the air, then thrown onto the chopping block. The wind was knocked out of him as he was slammed hard on the wood, and he felt something in his shoulder crack. One of the janitor's greasy fingers pried open his mouth. He could taste the janitor's putrid skin.

"You're mine," the janitor repeated.

The last thing Steven felt was the janitor's cold hands running lovingly through his hair.

Timmy Turner, sitting alone at lunch the next day, thought the "barfaroni" was the best he'd had in a long time.

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AN ISLAND UNTO HERSELF

Barry Hoffman has spent the last 18 years as an inner-city teacher. His non-fiction has appeared in *HORRORSTUCK* and *CASTLEROCK*. His horror fiction has also been accepted by/ published in *SERENDIPITY*, *GAS*, and *FESTERING BRAINSORE*. Barry has completed one novel and is concluding research for a second. "Island Unto Herself" was inspired by his fourteen-year-old daughter's frenetic letter writing to her friends last summer; he has three children.

The mailman came. The mailman left. Nothing but bills, catalogues, sweepstake entries. Nothing but junk mail. She flung them unopened into the fireplace. Nothing from Becky or Paulette or Cindy, Louise, Carla . . . Nothing from any of them. Not today. Not yesterday. Not for two or was it three weeks? She had lost track of time. She ate . . . sometimes; slept fitfully; read voraciously without digesting a single word. More and more she felt herself becoming an island—surrounded by a hostile world waiting to tear her apart then toss her aside.

The letters had been her one link with reality and they had stopped. Not all at once. Nothing so sinister. Once a flood; then a stream—slow but steady; they had finally begun to trickle in with less and less regularity. Then they had dried up.

"Dammit to hell," she said to the walls. "Where are you? Why have you abandoned me? Don't you even have the decency to say goodbye? instead of just kissing me off without so much as 'Thanks for helping me get through the bad times.'"

Spent, Donna began to cry and was transported back to her first pen pal. To Sandra Shannon, who like the rest, had used her then abandoned her like yesterday's headlines.

Her sixth grade teacher had a colleague who had moved to Newton, Massachusetts—just outside of Boston. Wouldn't it be fun, she told the class, to become pen pals with his students. It wasn't a question. Making friends while honing their writing skills. Her classmates had

been less than enthusiastic. To them it only meant additional homework. For her, though, she'd be gaining a friend. Her only friend.

She was chubby, plain and not terribly bright. This self image was reinforced daily by her classmates.

"Looking good today four-eyes," Billy Buchanan said. "Finally got rid of your winter coat."

The others had laughed. It had been a running joke. Donna had one coat she'd worn from the first hint of autumn through the chilly spring mornings. Worn it to school. Worn it in school. Her cocoon—her protection against the taunting. No matter she'd sweat like a pig, with the temperature in class near 80 degrees even on the coldest days. No matter she reeked like a barnyard. Buried beneath her coat she was alone. Always alone. An island unto herself.

A pen pal, though. There was something magical about it. No fear of rejection from someone who couldn't see her, hear the faint trace of a lisp, smirk at her dowdy clothes. Someone she could pour her soul out to who would respond in kind. Sandra Shannon. The luck of the draw. Couldn't hurt to try.

At home she went straight to her room to begin, but was stopped by her mother.

"Don't even say hello to your mom, anymore?" she asked. She slurred her words. Three o'clock and drunk already, Donna muttered to herself.

"Sorry, mom, but I've got tons of homework."

"Too much homework to do your chores?"

"Can I do some of my homework now . . ."

"Fuck your homework," she interrupted.

"Fucking lot of good it'll do you. You'll get knocked up like I did and keeping house will be your job. Don't need no education for that. Learn to do 'em right and maybe your man won't run out on you. Now, go clean the john. It smells like shit." And, she burst out laughing at her unintended joke.

"Please . . ."

Her mother slapped her in the face knocking her glasses to the floor. Slapped her again.

"You ungrateful little bitch. I'm not asking." Another slap. "I'm not asking you to do your damn chores." And another, bringing blood from her nose. "I'm telling you." Slap. "You got shit for brains, just like your old man."

Hand drawn back to deliver another blow, she stepped on the glasses and they split in two. Her anger dissipated as quickly as it had risen. She held the glasses in her hand and through her stupor saw her child cowering—blood dripping from her cracked lip and nose.

"Oh baby, baby. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I love you more than life itself. Would never hurt my baby. Come, let mommy make it better."

Her mother tenderly cleaned her up, mouthing apologies and adulations of motherly love all the while. Then mended the glasses with adhesive tape. And, as so often before, she took her daughter to bed with her. Held her tightly to her chest singing nursery rhymes as if to a baby with a fever. Fell asleep. Donna went to her room and wrote to Sandra Shannon.

Dear Sandra:

My mother's a drunk. I hate her. I want to kill her. She deserves to die. No, that's not true. I love her and I know she loves me. It's the liquor that makes her mean . . .

And she poured out her heart to this stranger who might not even write back. Told her about her father—in jail for her brother's death. How her stupid father had left her six-month old brother in the car while he went to play cards with his friends. It was ninety degrees. How he had closed the windows so no one would steal his rust bucket that barely got him to and from work. How three hours later he found the police around the car trying to revive the child. How he couldn't understand why they were putting him away. How when the baby died her mother turned to alcohol.

Told her new pen pal about herself, but not that she was chubby, plain and utterly friendless. She might not have been terribly bright, but she wasn't stupid. Wrote seven pages and mailed it as her mother slept. Then she did her chores.

Waited for a response. Watched the clock crawl ever so slowly towards three o'clock. Dashed home. Nothing. Three days, four days,

five days. Other kids excitedly brought in replies they had received. All superficial shit as Donna heard classmates sharing their letters out loud. My name is so and so. I like basketball or football or jumping rope. Favorite singing groups, hobbies, movies, television shows. Shallow, just like her classmates. Maybe this wasn't such a bad assignment, after all, they grudgingly admitted.

Donna was crushed. She had bared her soul and once again been rejected. She no longer cajoled the clock to move its ass. Took her time getting home knowing only the drudgery of chores and an alcoholic mother awaited her. Didn't even look at the mail the seventh or eighth day. To hell with you, Sandra Shannon, she thought. To hell with all of you. Set to washing the kitchen floor when her mother staggered in holding an envelope.

"You got a letter in the mail, yesterday. Didn't you see it? From Newton, Massachusetts. Who do you know in Newton, Massachusetts, anyway?"

Donna hid her excitement. No sense in arousing her mother's curiosity. She'd want to share it with her. "Just some research we had to do for school. Want to leave it on the table. I'll look at it after dinner."

Her mother shrugged, her cluttered thoughts already wandering to something else.

Washed the floor. Cooked dinner. Did the dishes. Set up her mother in front of the television where she'd probably fall asleep. Dashed to her room. Locked the room. Tore the sucker open. Six pages! Six glorious pages! With one of those adhesive stick-on notes on the first page apologizing for the delay.

"Was going to mail this out days ago, but kept thinking of things to add. Love, Sandy."

There was none of the trite gossip her classmates had received. Sandy opened up just as Donna had. Trouble with her brother—one who kept trying to sneak a look at her when she showered. Boy trouble. She liked Doug, but Warren was so cute and showered her with gifts. Didn't want to hurt either of them. Parents overprotective. One set of rules for her brothers and another for her. Be home fifteen minutes after school or grounded. Poor grades—grounded. Too much time on the phone—grounded. She felt like killing them, just like Donna with her mom. Even sent a picture.

No wonder two boys were after her, Donna thought. Thick chestnut hair flowing past

her shoulders. Eyes that blazed with intensity even in a photo. Smile that radiated confidence. Cute little dimple. Pert little body. And, nice titties, as her mother would say.

Donna dashed off a five page response. Told of her frustrations when the other kids got their letters. Empathized with her family situation. Gave sage advice where Sandy had asked. Ignored the request for a picture. Mailed it while her mother dozed in front of the tube. Then helped her up to bed. Back in her room she read Sandy's letter a second and third time.

Sandy responded in four days. Two-and-a-half pages mostly about the continuing saga of Doug and Warren. Donna was slightly disappointed. Doug and Warren. Doug and Warren. Screw Doug and Warren, Donna wanted to scream. Tell me what makes you tick.

Donna wrote another five page letter with cutting anecdotes about her classmates. I'll have to lead her by the hand, Donna thought. Sandy responded in kind. "By the way," she said in a P.S. "Doug's out of the picture. At the Halloween dance he was slow dragging with Tina Lawson and he was all over her" and on for another page.

Donna had been making lists of things she wanted to tell Sandy about. She faithfully answered each of Sandy's letters the day they arrived. Sandy, for her part, slowed her pace, though apologizing profusely. "Sorry for the delay, but cheerleading practice has been taking up all my time;" this after a two week wait.

"Don't be mad at me, Donna, but I've had so much Christmas shopping to do. I haven't had time to write. Got you a nice present, though;" after not writing for three weeks.

They exchanged Christmas presents, but Sandy didn't write again until after Valentine's day, despite Donna's four letters. "No, silly, I'm not sick. I didn't have an accident. I'm in love!" she finally answered. She went on to tell about Steven and how they'd French kissed at the movies.

"Who the hell is Steven?" Donna wrote back. "You never mentioned him before." By the time Sandy wrote back after Easter Steven was history and it was Kenny she was gushing about. And, Sandy, was getting pissed with Donna's demands to write more often. "I hope you won't take this wrong, but I don't appreciate your lectures about lack of consideration."

Donna did and told Sandy in no uncertain terms. "What's a friend for if you can't be

honest," Donna's letter concluded. Sandy didn't respond. Donna wrote back apologizing. Nothing. She wrote daily for the next two weeks. Nothing. She finally gave up. Sandy was just like all the rest. Too caught up in herself and her endless string of boyfriends to care for anyone else's feelings.

Donna brooded and retreated even further into herself. No one noticed.

Then, near the end of the term, Mrs. Boyd told the class another friend from Texas had students interested in summer pen pals. Was anyone interested? Most of the class had long ago stopped corresponding with their pen pals once the novelty wore off. And, with summer just around the bend, no one was much in the mood for further writing. When no one volunteered Mrs. Boyd grudgingly admitted defeat and trashed her list of names and addresses.

Donna, though, had a brainstorm. Remembering only the good times, she thought how much more enjoyable it would be to have two, three, even four pen pals. This way if one stopped writing there'd always be others. At recess she retrieved Mrs. Boyd's list and wrote to seven girls that night.

And she'd communicated with pen pals ever since. Inevitably her "friends" interests expanded and their desire to correspond waned. When Donna became too demanding they parted ways. But, for Donna, there were endless sources of new "friends." She joined fan clubs, listened to talk shows and scoured the classifieds of magazines for fresh fodder.

Often she'd be writing to fifteen people at a time, hustling home after work to see what the mail brought. One by one, though, her friends departed. Lonely souls found companionship. Challenging new jobs opened new venues.

But, the real problem was with a life bereft of excitement and stimulation Donna found she had less and less to communicate. At thirty-two, at the edge of despair, Donna realized she'd nothing left to say. She hadn't received any mail because she hadn't written to anyone in over two months. Nothing to say. She hadn't answered the few letters that had come. Couldn't. Blank paper stared back at her. Nothing to say. She had given herself for twenty years and was tapped out. She had been raped of her thoughts. With realization came panic.

Sobbing she ran out of the house into her little Hyundai. Economical, sensible, inconspicuous—just like me, she thought bitterly.

Cruised around. Driving by instinct. The loneliness was oppressive, stifling. She hyper-ventilated. Only one way out. She pressed down on the accelerator.

Thirty-five . . . the wall on Lincoln Boulevard . . . 45 . . . just a little further . . . 55 . . . for Sandy, Becky, Paulette . . . 65 . . . Cindy, Louise, Carla . . . 70 . . . just a block away . . . 75 . . . foot on the brake; veer to the right; 180 degree turn. Silence. The only sound her weeping. She couldn't do it. Didn't even have the guts to end it all. So typical, she thought. So utterly predictable. This is my hell—my living hell. "I hate you," she screamed. "I hate all of you." Windows closed. No one heard. No one cared.

Foot on the accelerator. Cruising. Planning. Yes, go for it, she said to herself, then giggled like a little girl.

There, a guy thumbing a ride. She picked him up. They talked. Idle chatter. A runaway. Parents forever bugging him. "You're room's a mess. You're irresponsible. We pay the freight and what do we get in return—a lazy good-for-nothing slug."

"Wouldn't you do your chores?" she asked.

"Hey, I'm not their damn slave. I didn't mind pitching in, but . . . I needed space. Privacy, you know. And, time for a social life."

"I know what you mean. My mother was like that. Always dumping on me. Never could satisfy her."

His hands on her thigh. Tickled. Brought goosebumps. He stroke her gently, slowly making his way up.

"Wait," she said. She's calm. In control. "Wouldn't want us to have an accident." Giggled, as he pinched her. "Let's find a place with some privacy."

"Anything you say." He felt good. Chubby, plain, nothing to write home about, but, hell, he hadn't had a piece of ass since he'd left home two weeks ago. Maybe she'll let me crash at her place for a while, he fantasized. Decent food. Hot shower. It's your lucky night man.

She pulled behind a warehouse on Van Buren. Secluded. Isolated. No sooner had she turned off the engine than he's all over her—grabbing her tits, stroking her pudgy thighs.

"You love Mommy?" she said. (No, she thought. I hate you. I've always hated you.)

"Yes! Oh yes! I love you, Mommy!" The bitch was wacko, he thought, but whatever

turned her on. He unbuttoned her blouse.

"You going to be a good boy?"

"Yes." Unsnapped her bra.

"You going to do your chores?" (She saw her mother slouching against the wall; a bottle in her hand as she watched Donna wash, scrub, dust. A slave. She had made her slave.)

"Yeah, sure." Sucks on her breasts.

"You like when Mommy touches you here?" she said, her hand on his erection. (She felt her mother's spidery hands roam across her body, as they lay together after one of her tantrums.)

"Oh, God yes!" Biting her nipples.

"You been a bad boy!" Pushed him away. Slapped him in the face.

Cruised around. Driving by instinct. The loniless was oppressive, stifling. Only one way out! She pressed down on the acclerator.

"What the . . ."

"You haven't done your chores." She slapped him again, feeling her mother lashing into her at the same time.

"Kinky bitch, aren't you?"

"Don't talk to your mother like that!"

Another slap. (She saw her mother holding her broken glasses. Confused. Repentant.)

She stopped, upset at her outburst.

Sobbed. Apologized. "Mommy's sorry. Mommy didn't mean to hurt you. Come to Mommy. Give Mommy a hug."

He did as she asked. Crazy broad. Play her game though. No rush. No hurry. She's mine. He hugs her.

"Good boy." (You damn fake. Just like Sandy. Just like all of them. Use me, then cast me away.)

She reached into her purse. Fumbled around and found her pen. Grabbed the back of his hair. Jerked him back. Peered into his confused eyes. Jabbed the pen in his throat. Once. Again. And again. Yelling at him, "You're a bad boy. Trying to take advantage of your mother. You're a bad girl, Sandy. No more playing with Mommy."

He stared at her, but saw nothing.

She started the car. Drove a few miles to a little used road. Dumped his body. No one noticed. No one ever noticed Donna. Drove home. Showered. Wrote a letter to her new

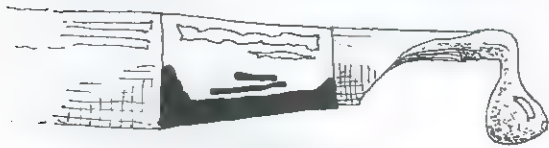
pen pal, reliving the evening in vivid detail.
Dressed and mailed it.

Two days later, a letter arrived. The letter terrified her. Thrilled her. Nauseated her. Excited her. What an exciting life her new pen pal led. She got to the last line.

"It was so much fun I must do it again. Please write soon." So much fun . . . so much fun, she thought. So much fun . . . must do it again and again and again.

It's evening. She made sure her pen is in her purse.

Cruising. She's on the prow again.



PLAYGROUND MORBIDITY

In the most passionate of hearts
there lives and breeds a cruelty . . .
. . . and who among us has more passion
than the inquisitive child?
For his is but a world
of shattered wings
and legless frogs,
sticks that poke
and stones that maim;
But as we lay him
down to sleep
and pray the Lord
his soul to keep,
we know that cruelty breeds
much more than sorrow and remorse;
and despite the morbidity,
his cruelty is a love affair with life.

—Cathy Buburuz

STIGMA

Seized from the misty verge of sleep, instantly on guard:
The windows . . . dull moonlight through lace;
Grotesque shapes . . . discarded clothes;
Scraping and wheezing . . . beneath the bed?
Back pressed against the wall,
Toes pulled to safety—I froze.
A bloated hand crept slowly up the bed,
Its golden ring lit the room, sickly yellow glow.
Clamping on my silken sheets
the hand
heaved its owner to full height;
Shorter than the bed, he towered in my fears.
Rheumy eyes staring from a massive head,
He tossed a canvas sack on his bunched back
and hopped onto my bed.
Touch me, he whispered in my ear,
Slugs of spittle glistened in my hair.
I have gold that you could steal.
Like Loki, like Siegfried—if you desire wealth.
If it's in you to crave power, take my magic ring,
He grinned, spiders hatching in his teeth.
Touch me, touch me, touch me! He wailed. He fell into a fit.
Help me! His rotting mouth and twisted fingers screamed—
But I could not take his hand. He tumbled off the bed.
Rolling on the floor, he shrieked,
cobwebs shuddered at his crusty lips.
I've found your fault he hissed and slid into my soul.
My finger glowed. I held the bag
it wriggled in my bloated hands
and deep within its murky folds
a child cried.

--Dona Fox

THE OFFICER'S CLUB

Roman A. Ranieri lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with his wife, Maureen. He writes both fiction and non-fiction in the genres of horror, fantasy, and science fiction. Roman has work scheduled to appear in upcoming issues of FRIGHT DEPOT, AFTER HOURS, and SCAVENGER'S NEWSLETTER, and the anthology SIDESHOW edited by Tyson Blue. He is also currently nearing completion of his first novel.

Donald Wallace was startled awake by the sound of a strange voice calling his name. His eyes opened and darted in all directions as he tried to remember where he was. He saw white. A white ceiling, white walls, and a white floor. Was he in a hospital? What had happened to him? An auto accident? A heart attack? How had he gotten here?

"It's time to wake up, Major Wallace. We'll have to leave shortly."

He had to lift his head up from the white pillow to find the origin of the unfamiliar voice. He saw a man sitting in a metal chair against the far wall. The man was dressed in a crisply-starched, camouflaged uniform. He was clean-shaven and wore his brown hair in a short, military style.

"Am I in a military hospital?" Wallace asked, his voice dry and raspy.

The man smiled as he stood up and came to the foot of the bed. "I suppose you could call it that, Major Wallace."

For the first time, Wallace glanced down at his own body and was shocked to discover that he also was wearing camouflaged battle-dress fatigues. He propped himself up on one elbow and examined the two breast pockets of his shirt. Above the left pocket was stenciled U.S. ARMY, above the right pocket was his name, WALLACE.

"What's going on here? Why am I wearing this uniform? I retired from the service nearly ten years ago. How did I get here?"

"How you got here is unimportant at the moment. The reason for the uniform, however, is vitally important, because in a few minutes

you'll be going into combat, Major Wallace."

"Combat? This whole thing is crazy. I demand to see the commanding officer of this place."

"I'm your commanding officer, Major Wallace."

Wallace strained to see the small, black metal rank insignia on the collar of the man's shirt. He quickly recognized the stacked chevrons of a First Sergeant.

"Are you crazy, Sergeant? Have you any idea of the severe consequences of this ridiculous prank? Now you go and bring back your C.O., and if I'm satisfied with his explanation of all this, I'll overlook your insubordination."

The sergeant smiled sarcastically. "You haven't changed a bit. Have you, Major? You still think of your rank as a God-given power which automatically makes you right without even a second thought."

Wallace paused as he read the stenciled name on the sergeant's shirt. "Have we met before, Sergeant Parker? Were you ever under my command?"

"Oh yes, Major, I certainly was under your command. I didn't expect you to remember me, but I'm sure you still remember Delta Company and the battle of Kham Duc, don't you?"

Wallace visibly tensed, and his eyes narrowed with suspicion as he replied. "Yes, I remember Kham Duc. The battle was a terrible tragedy. Delta Company suffered heavy casualties defending the town."

"Heavy casualties?" Parker laughed. "Your memory is a little distorted, Major. Delta Company was wiped out trying to hold that stinking town on your orders. I was with Captain Wade when he radioed you and described the massive force of NVA regulars that were beginning to surround Kham Duc. I heard him ask to evacuate us before we got cut off. He told you how hopeless the situation was. He nearly begged you to get us out of there."

"That's enough!" Wallace cried nervously. "I was following my orders. Kham Duc

was of vital importance to us. We had to try to hold it!"

"We never had a chance of holding that stinking town!" screamed Parker. "And you knew that! But your damned ego wouldn't allow you to let your men retreat, would it? No, instead you just gave Captain Wade a little pep talk and told him to hang tough until reinforcements arrived. All because you didn't want a failure on your record. Not when you were being considered for that Pentagon post. Right, Major?"

"Who are you? How can you know all that?" Wallace asked, his voice trembling.

"Because I was there, Major. Because of you, I was killed at Kham Duc."

"No! This can't be happening. I must be dreaming!"

"You're not dreaming, Major. You had a massive heart attack last night, and now you're going to get what you deserve."

Wallace's eyes widened in terror as he cringed from Parker. "You're telling me that I'm dead? No, it can't be. I don't believe it."

"Believe it, Major."

"But—but I'm a Catholic. My religion guarantees that I'll be judged by God when I die, and I haven't been judged yet."

"You've already had your judgement, Major. You just don't recall it because it was erased from your memory."

"Why? Why was it erased from my memory?"

"Because seeing God is the most beautiful experience you could ever imagine, and since you were sent here, you don't deserve to keep the memory of that experience, now do you?"

"This just can't be happening. I must have gone insane."

"It's time to go, Major," said Parker, extending his hand toward Wallace.

"No! No! I refuse to —."

Wallace blinked, then jerked back in shock. He was no longer in the white room. He now stood in a deep trench carved out of red rock and sandy soil. He glanced to his left, then to his right. There were hundreds of men, perhaps even thousands, packed into the long trench as far as his eyes could see.

Once his initial shock wore off, Wallace began to notice the various uniforms the men were wearing. He recognized British, French, and German uniforms. Japanese, Russian, Australian, and Italian soldiers were also present. Further down the trench he saw men

dressed in Union and Confederate colors from the American Civil War.

Wallace turned to look down the opposite end of the trench. He saw Mexican soldiers from the time of Santa Anna, Spanish conquistadors, and Medieval knights. His jaw dropped in awe as two shocking realizations came to him almost simultaneously; these men represented every army that had ever gone to war since the dawn of mankind, and every last one of them was an officer.

"Sort of like the ultimate Officer's Club. Eh, Major?"

Wallace's head spun around to look over his shoulder. Sergeant Parker now stood directly behind him.

"What is this? What's happening here?"

"These are all men like you, Major. Men who were supposed to be military leaders, but their overinflated egos mattered more to them than the lives of their men. Now they—and you—are going to experience the hell you sent us through."

Wallace heard the shrill sound of a whistle, and suddenly he was climbing up out of the trench. Parker followed closely behind. Not touching him, but somehow forcing him onward. He looked around him. Each officer was now accompanied by a similarly uniformed enlisted man, driving them like cattle through the use of some unknowable power.

Wallace gasped in pain and surprise, then looked down to see a gaping hole where a bullet had torn through his left hand. He looked up again, in the direction he was involuntarily running. He clenched his eyes shut, then opened them. In the distance there was an advancing line of impossible creatures. An army of indescribable demons from every nightmare ever dreamed, and each armed with a different weapon of destruction. He saw everything from machine guns, rifles, and flamethrowers; to bows and arrows, spears, and swords.

Suddenly, Wallace stepped on a mine. He screamed as the explosion ripped off his right calf and part of his thigh. He instinctively thrust his hands out to break his fall, but to his horror, he kept running. It was impossible, but his stride had not even faltered. He gagged as he heard the dangling chunks of flesh slapping wetly against the exposed bones of his leg.

Wallace's ears filled with the sounds of screams as the other officers around him were also horribly wounded, again and again. Terror scorched his brain as the army of demons drew

nearer. A tongue of flame licked out toward him. The Nazi Colonel to his left was instantly engulfed in a blazing inferno. Wallace instantly realized that his shirt was on fire. He gazed down in helpless panic as the skin of his chest and stomach began to sizzle like charred meat. He shrieked in agony, but still he kept running.

Never in his worst nightmares had he ever imagined such excruciating pain, or such intolerable emotional anguish. A moment later, the opposing armies met.

A demon vaguely resembling a giant bat rose up in front of Wallace and hacked off his right arm with a Japanese samurai sword. Wallace stopped running. He staggered drunk-

only as he watched the parched soil greedily absorbing his blood. He then began to beg for mercy as the demon reared back for another swing. The sharp blade whizzed down in a lethal arc, nearly slicing Wallace in half. He stumbled backwards and finally crashed to the ground. He sighed with relief as the battlefield began to fade, and his pain slowly subsided. He thankfully closed his eyes. At last it was over.

"You can open your eyes now, Major," said a now-familiar voice behind him.

Wallace timidly opened his eyes, and an inhuman scream tore from his throat. He was standing in the trench again. From somewhere unseen, the whistle blew.

GIFTING

You always asked for so much,
blood tribute, a dripping ear
sweet saliva, slow juice
of a wet ugly morning
fishing for its meaning in the snow.

You were always so grateful
kneeling in the gravel on your knees
ground flesh, milk porridge
steel wool—
nothing soothed your howls.

You always called it gifting,
smiling if you could,
extracting the crystal
from the nodes, heat striking
your nostrils in waves.

I always lost the fight,
was left to drive the nails.
You picked the yellow dermis out
from beneath the soft skin,
feel asleep with your chains.

—Denise D umars

OAK INTO MAN

Oak into man, man into oak;
long roots wind under graveyards,
passing through those hidden skulls
resting on velvet in buried coffins,
sipping on jellied remains
of dark and rancorous brains,
and sucking marrow from bones.

On stormy nights, oak branches dip,
bony hands grasping lightning-spears
as the wind howls like a tormented soul
in the dark and swaying crown.
Knowing where its roots have supped,
do you wonder at its rage,
or that the bark bears a corpse's face,
and the wildly swinging branches
try to strangle—or caress?

—Janet P. Reedman



THE HOUNDS OF HELL TO PAY

David A. Lindschmidt is a promising new writer. His work has/ will appear in issues of NEW BLOOD, ELD-RITCH TALES, TERROR TIME AGAIN, and DARK STARR. "Hounds of Hell To Pay" is a particularly dark tale and will linger with you long after the magazine is finished.

Felix checked again to be sure he was alone, then knelt and whispered into the black floor. She came to him in an instant. Her eyes were hazy, lurid blue, lips subtle pink and it was as though she had been waiting in the dark reaches for his plea.

She wore a slightly hurt, slightly bothered look; her golden hair fell in erotic disarray. Felix rubbed his chin in anticipation and then wiped a forearm across his mouth.

"I need more," he said. "Give me more!" He clenched a fist then relaxed it, remembering how good the last had been.

"Surely," she hissed. "In need, again, so soon?" She crossed the room without a sound, her eyes flaring when she spoke as if stars in the night; behind them was a world, a galaxy . . . chaos.

"Yes, yes," he answered. "Of course. The other didn't last. I have so little sleep without it," he whimpered and searched her face for absolution. It was not there. "You cannot deny me!" he added. "I've made a deal!"

And he had struck a deal. Everyone carries around with them aspirations, hopes, dreams—desire. But when he dwelled on it, allowed it to, desire had become a palpable thing. It was hideous and hungry like the worms quietly munching away in some long-covered grave. Having met this thing, desire, on its own terms, having felt it gnaw at his soul, he had become ready to forfeit everything under his control. He would promise his possessions, his life, even more to satisfy the craving. Desire is a deep, insatiable thing.

"Ah, so you remember. I had hoped you wouldn't forget, little man." She held out her neatly shaped hand, palm up, and the rig came to

her. "This," Felix could see it and desire began to writhe in his mind, aching to be fed, "is the last of your credit. I believe you understand?"

His eyesight was adjusting to the dimness. Felix noticed the curvaceous outline of her frame. Her thigh flesh was white, contrasting splendidly with her black, leather boots that covered to just above the knee. Her huge, jeweled belt with a silver pentagram began to shine.

"I understand," he muttered.

"That is fine." She placed his arm on her thigh, made a production of finding a vein, rolled up his sleeve just so and shot him full of chemical bliss. And then she was gone.

Felix did not leave his room for several days. He was not missed. The way the world had become with all of its strife, its bloated population, people paid no attention to things that were not exclusively of value to themselves.

Police departments had become scant vigilante squads holding court in the street and answering to no one. Schools were a portion of history that only a handful could read about. Flames devoured entire buildings unfought and Felix drifted to the furthest reaches of his imagination. Spittle eased down his chin as he conquered new worlds in his mind, always a slave to rampant desire.

The dreams began to fade and blur. Longing sensations stirred him from a drugged sleep. He twitched on the sweat drenched bed then stood up in the night, quivering in the darkness. His desire had been dormant for a time, but now it was awakening. It screamed at him from every dark corner at once, hungry suddenly for more. He staggered to a window, peeked around its heavy cover and saw faces roaming the streets, melting in a rain that fell in huge balls of dread. The sky was purple, black—the deep colors of hurt.

He called to her.

As before, she was there in an instant. There was a malicious grin dancing on her lips and in her tumultuous eyes. It sickened him.

She looked down at him.

He curled into a ball on the floor, crossing his arms in front of himself in a parody of embarrassment. There was nothing he could hide from her. His expression, the torment beading on his brow, said it all for him. He spoke anyway. "I hurt," he said, then twitched convulsively and tried to smile. It did not work.

"And I can heal you." She stood only a few feet before him, however, the voice he heard seemed to have come through the floor, engulfing him like flame. "First, you must answer your end of the bargain."

Felix recoiled from the words as if struck by them physically. "Please," he begged, "can't I have more time?"

She moved to the thickly shrouded window, pulled back its drapes and gazed out. "There is no more time," she said with an air of finality that he could not deny.

Felix pulled on a satin robe and walked out of the room. She followed and he had no fear of her being seen. He knew she wouldn't be. Portraits of solemn faces haunted him as he moved through the once plush corridor. He inserted a key into a huge door and pushed it open. Next, he punched secret numbers into a computer from his tortured memory. His hand stopped on a button.

She smiled faintly; it was the contented leer of a whore. The office was the shape of an egg, but no one had ever thought it would hatch all hell itself. Felix pushed the red button then laid his emaciated, starving arm atop the desk.

A large man in a uniform that vaguely resembled one from a more honorable time rushed into the room. "Is there a problem, Mr. President?"

But there wasn't. The hounds of hell had been paid.

NIGHT FROST

Night frost comes,
Needles driven
into world's brain.
Cold armor plates grass,
Prismed cat's eyes
That wanly glitter.

My season has arrived,
I wait mighty wind
To ravage leaves,
An unseen hand
That rips away a mask
At lasting midnight
So even blind can see.

Illumined in ice light
I smile on my battlements,
My ears revel
At screams
of tortured sheep
Fear moaning at Earth's visage.

Frightened ones huddle,
Quaver like sacrificial victims,
Tremble like a young girl
Whose robes are ripped away
By one who will leave her in
Death's arms quietly bleeding.

Winter has come
To ignite dark marrow
In my vicious bones.

—Dwight E. Humphries

FADING TO GRAY

The room is strange to me.
Raised red arteries run across gray wallpaper
in a crazy, obscene pattern.

Feigning sleep, the cloth blinds hanging like limp
accordians
are dropped eyelids.
the windows watch me now, instead of the
world.
The glow from the street light soaks through the
false skin.
I'm trapped
inside.

The room breathes thick, recycled air
through a metallic mouth.
The throb of a motor
is a heartbeat.

I drift through the night,
tossing my way through sleep
where dark slumbers probe sanity,
sometimes
falling
all the way
down
into Hell.

Nightmares
of soft pulsing walls,
of flickering, textured lids.
Maybe mine.
Maybe not.
Who knows...

And the room
broods.

—Ann K. Taylor

MOMMIE'S GARDEN

The rosebed in the garden
Forbidden to us all
Is where Mommie sits alone at night
Against the weathered wall
"Don't go near the roses"
Mommie's warned us kids
Mommie says they're evil flowers
Where she so saintly sits
But spying through closed windows
I've peeked between the gap
Where Mommie sits contently
With an axe upon her lap
"Don't go in the garden"
Mommie cautions me each day
It's really not the sort of place
A little girl should play
But I know Mommie's secret
It's something no one's feared
Mommie's dealt with all of them
(The one's who've disappeared)
And buried in our garden
Those judged by Mommie's axe
I've studied possibilities
And come up with the facts
I'm sitting in the rosebed
Forbidden here no more
And Mommie too, is here with me
But not quite like before.

—M.M.M. Farrell

VICTIMATER

The orphans
culled from DNA
experiments strike
identical poses,
their sexless eyes bland.

"Make no attempt to kill us, Mother
We have an arrangement."

(a thin dust of arsenic
on their morning cereal, they
convulse in simultaneous reaction)

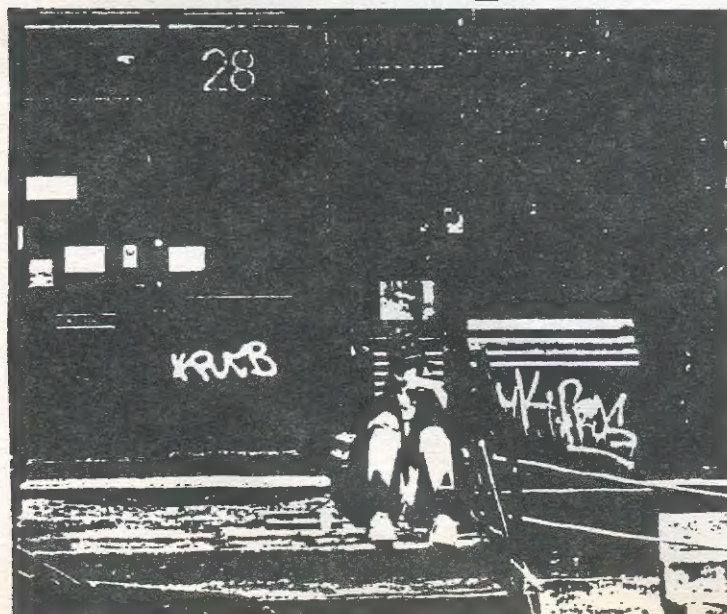
She drags
their bodies to
the pit beyond the house,
hours laboring,
covering sod with stones.

In tears, she watches
shadows of the trees
windless, masturbating
in unholy rhythms.

At sunset,
feet in perfect
unison, matched in
singsong chant,
they come.

—M.B. Simon

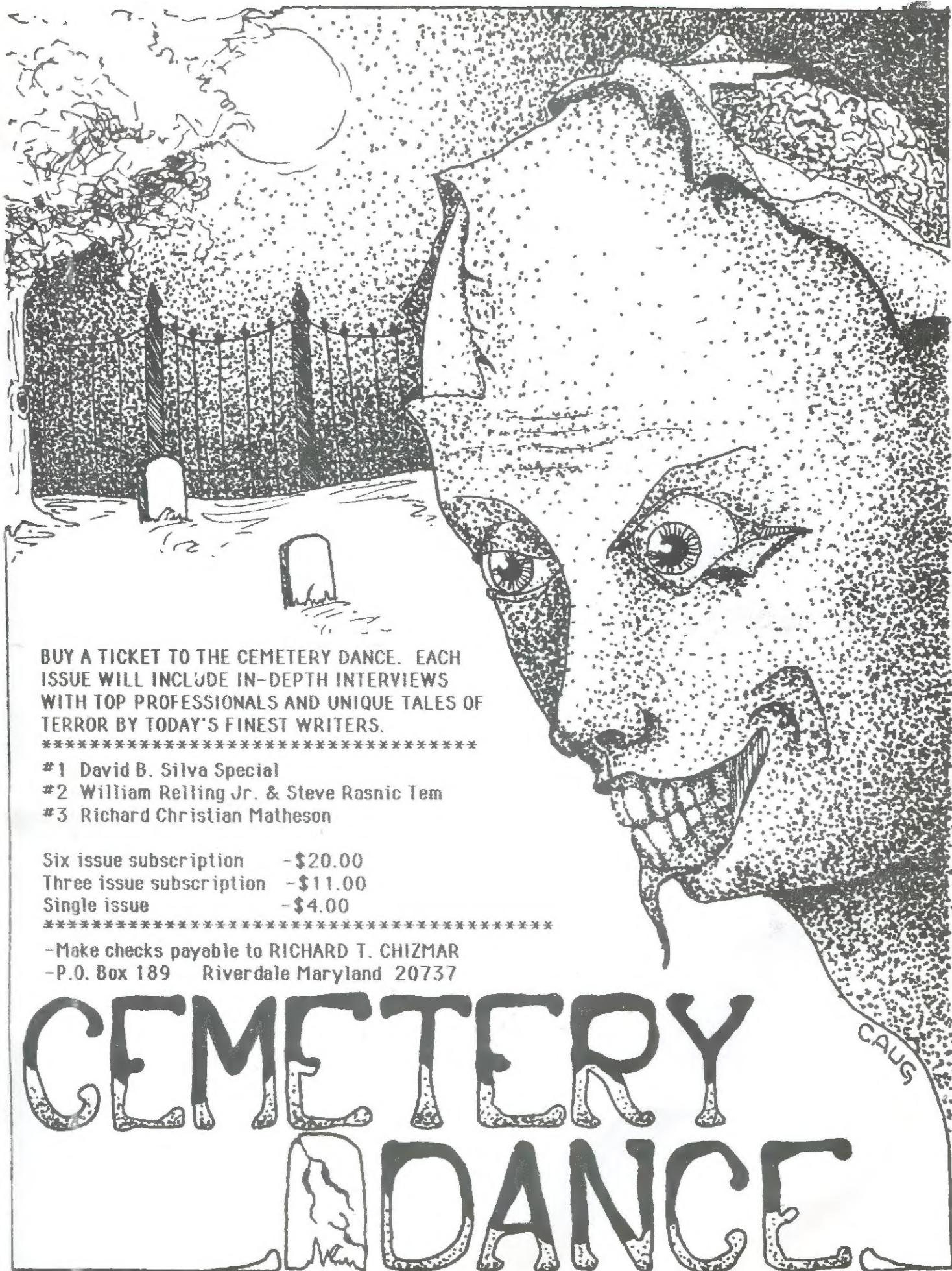
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